

# ***Macbeth***

## Pearson Edexcel International GCSE Study Guide

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## Teacher's Introduction

This guide is designed to cover the whole of *Macbeth* in such a way as to prepare begins with a brief summary of the plot and descriptions of the key characters be scene of the play in depth. It includes activities to aid student comprehension and lead to group or class discussions, as well as written pieces of work. Suggested p provided at the end of the pack.

The next section of the guide considers the whole play, in depth, including charac themes and messages. These notes will encourage students to see the broader picture think critically about the play as a whole, developing their own personal respons

The writer's *Macbeth* is explored in detail with sections on language, form and s equip students with the tools that they will need to analyse language and techni uses language to have particular effects on his audience (AO2). A glossary of tech the resource) will help students to use the correct terminology when they write Shakespeare is then explored against the background of his times to give student *Macbeth* and its links to Shakespeare's society and the world in which we live to

### Specification Information

This resource supports the exam board specification for Pearson Edexcel IGCSE. board as a set text for Component 2: Modern Drama and Literary Heritage Texts (examined) and Component 3: Modern Drama and Literary Heritage Texts (course

Component 2 is worth 40% of the total qualification. In this component candidates Modern Drama text and one Literary Heritage text. Component 3 is **available as** and also assesses 40% of the total English Literature qualification through two co set and assessed, and externally set and assessed.

The assessment objectives for this board are as follows.

- AO1** Demonstrate a close knowledge and understanding of texts, maintaining informed personal judgement.
- AO2** Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meaning.
- AO4** Show understanding of relationships between texts and the contexts in which

Guide section	AO1	AO2	AO4
Plot summary and key characters	X		
Scene-by-scene analysis	X	X	X
Characterisation and relationships	X		X
Settings and props	X		X
Themes	X		X
Ideas and messages	X		X
Language	X	X	X
Form	X	X	X
Structure	X		X
Context	X		X
Glossary		X	

### Text Edition

The edition of *Macbeth* used to write this resource is *Oxford School Shakespeare: Macbeth*, edited by Roma Gill (ISBN-13 978-0198324003). For Component 2, prescribed edition: OUP Oxford, March 2009 (ISBN 9780198324003).

### Acknowledgement

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## Plot Summary

The main events of a play or a novel – from the opening scene to the end of the story – make up its plot. This plot summary gives you an outline of all the important events in the play *Macbeth*.

The play opens on a 'blasted heath' or desolate wasteland somewhere in Scotland, where three witches are planning when, and under what circumstances, to meet again. They arrange to meet with a man called Macbeth. The witches meet with him, as arranged, as he is riding home from battle with his fellow general and close friend, Banquo. They greet him and pronounce him Thane of Cawdor and 'King hereafter'. Banquo is told that he will be father of kings. They then evaporate into thin air.

Immediately after this, a messenger, Ross, arrives on the scene and tells Macbeth that King Duncan has made him Thane of Cawdor in recognition of his valour in battle. Macbeth writes a letter to his wife at their Inverness castle informing her of the events. She immediately sets plans for the throne for him. She persuades her husband to kill Duncan that night when he is sleeping. Goaded by his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan in his sleep.

He returns with the dagger to his wife and tells her he cannot face putting it in the king's chamber. Lady Macbeth replaces the dagger and covers the king's drugged

Macduff, a nobleman, arrives at the castle and discovers the dead king. Suspecting foul play, he and his wife quickly kill them. Macbeth, being incensed by this, Macduff kills the king's sons Malcolm and Donalbain. Macbeth becomes suspicious of the whole business and crowns himself king. Soon after, he has worries about Banquo's loyalty to the deposed king. He hires assassins to kill Banquo. Banquo's son Fleance escapes the ambush with his life.

Banquo's ghost turns up at the banquet later that night to haunt Macbeth. Macbeth is the only one who can see the ghost. It causes embarrassment at the feast after making excuses for him.

Macbeth rules Scotland with a rod of iron, but he is still insecure. He knows there are serious enemies. He consults the witches again. They call up to him what is in store for him. Rather than this reassuring him, Macbeth is shocked by the revelations. He takes some comfort from the predictions that 'none born of woman' can harm him physically, and he cannot be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. He orders his enemies to the sword, starting immediately with Macduff's wife and children.

In England, Macduff hears of these atrocities and joins forces with Malcolm. Meanwhile, back in Scotland, guilt is tormenting Lady Macbeth's mind. She is sleepwalking and reliving her own part in the aftermath of King Duncan's murder. Macbeth is secure in the witches' assurance that he cannot be harmed or defeated. He becomes ill with his illness, he appears unperturbed. Lady Macbeth commits suicide, and Macbeth takes it in his stride, and appears preoccupied with his preparations for battle. He meets the approaching army, camouflaged by branches from trees in Birnam Wood.

During the battle, Macbeth realises the true significance of the witches' predictions. He is killed by Macduff, who tells him that he was delivered by caesarean section, not born of woman. Macduff kills Macbeth and presents his head as a trophy to Malcolm, the new king.

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# Act 1

## Act 1, Scene 1

*Location: 'Open country', a deserted forest or hill in Scotland*

### Summary

The three witches meet on a stormy night in the open country to discuss their plans with Macbeth.

### Analysis

The opening scene of *Macbeth* is very short but it introduces us to three of the most influential characters of the play – the three witches. The witches' physical appearance is small but they remain a constant and influential presence throughout.

This first short scene establishes the witches' connection to Macbeth, the plan to meet. It makes the audience curious to discover who he is and also (l, i, 3) that the witches have been discussing. With this device, Shakespeare equips the audience with knowledge that Macbeth does not have throughout the action of the play, namely that the witches have an evil plan.

### Setting

The scene is set in 'the open country' in a storm and provides a prime example of a device in which writers use the weather to reflect the mood or emotion of a scene.

*When shall we three meet again,  
In thunder, lightning or in rain?*

This dark and stormy weather alerts the audience to the fact that the story is about a dark and stormy journey.

### Stage directions

Thunder is noted in the stage directions in this and all of the scenes featuring the witches themselves often refer to the bad weather conditions.

### Language and style

The witches always appear as a group and are never differentiated between. Each witch speaks a line, which is continued by the next witch to create a sense of unity. They sometimes speak in unison as if they know what the others are thinking, giving them a paranormal quality.

The witches' language is a type of rhythmic incantation and it appears in stark contrast to the mannered speech of the noblemen that is adopted by most of the other characters in the play. It is also full of riddles and paradoxes, such as '... when the battle's lost and won' (l, i, 4), that leave the audience in no doubt that they are watching a group of subnormal creatures with their own bizarre values and beliefs. The witches refer to their two familiars, Graymalkin and Paddock, and appear to answer their calls. This, in itself, is enough to secure the audience's impression of them as witches.

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# Act 1, Scene 2

*Location: A soldier's camp near Forres*

## Summary

The audience is introduced to King Duncan and his three sons. King Duncan praises Macbeth's bravery in battle and decides to make Macbeth Thane of Cawdor.

## Analysis

As the scene opens, King Duncan and his sons meet a wounded officer and a captain from the battle. The officer tells them that Macbeth fought a close battle with Macdonald's Scottish army and killed all the forces that he led, but that Macbeth was victorious. Macbeth is then introduced to the audience.

The audience learns that Macbeth is related to King Duncan: 'O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman' (I, ii, 24). This also shows that, at this point in the play, Macbeth is held in high regard.

The officer explains that the army immediately faced a new threat from the Norwegians who have launched a fresh attack. Macbeth and his fellow captain Banquo were not afraid to go forward wholeheartedly and violently to defeat their enemy. The officer is too weak to finish his story and so Duncan sends him away to be attended to by doctors.

Angus and Ross enter the stage and they are able to give King Duncan the news that he has won the battle. They have come from the battle and inform Duncan that Macbeth has defeated the Norwegian king who has been fined and forced to retreat. They also mention that Macbeth has betrayed Duncan by fighting on the Norwegian side.

## Characterisation

In this scene, Macbeth is portrayed as a brave and loyal soldier. Duncan decides to give the title of Thane of Cawdor to Macbeth and that his title should be conferred upon Macbeth and his loyal friend Banquo. A key quotation is 'What he [the Thane of Cawdor] hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won' (I, ii, 75) because the audience will later realise that when Macbeth becomes Thane of Cawdor, he is as disloyal as his predecessor and pays for it with his life. The scene also shows that Macbeth has changed throughout the action of the play and how treacherous he becomes.

## Context (AO4)

This scene provides the audience with an introduction to the social context of the play. Scotland is a country that is constantly at threat from external forces, at a time when wars were fought on battlefields. Men gained wealth, power and status from their prowess in battle. The audience also learns that the play is set in Scotland at the time it was written because King James I had just come to the throne as King James VI of Scotland. Shakespeare portrays Scottish people as brave and loyal. The play also includes characters from Scottish history including Banquo.

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# Act 1, Scene 3

Location: A heath near Forres

## Summary

Macbeth and his friend, Banquo, meet the three witches on the heath as they return from battle. The witches make three predictions for each of them and Macbeth begins to wonder what the future might hold for him.

## Analysis

Once again, the three witches enter the stage to the sounds of thunder. They boast of their evil powers and discuss their activities since the last meeting. The third witch alludes to the limits of their power: 'Though his bark cannot be lost, / Yet it shall be tempest-tossed' (I, iii, 24–25). She is talking about a sailor that she wishes to upset. She means that while she cannot make the boat disappear, she can make his journey very unpleasant. Remembering the limits of the witches' power is important as the play progresses.

A drum roll announces the approach of Macbeth and so the witches recite and prepare their spell. Macbeth speaks his first line of the play: 'So foul and fair' (I, iii, 38). This is the first indication that the witches have some kind of power. At this early stage in the play, he is unknowingly echoing their words.

It is Banquo who first notices the witches and he is clearly suspicious of them. He does not like 'th' inhabitants o' th' Earth' (I, iii, 41) and describes them using various metaphors. He questions whether they are alive and whether they understand what he says. He asks them to speak and they proceed to hail him as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King hereafter.

Banquo notices that Macbeth has gone quiet and appears to be lost in thought. Macbeth is shocked by the witches and wonders why he would be afraid of them. He challenges the witches to make a prediction about his future and the response is:

*Lesser than Macbeth and greater.  
Not so happy, yet much happier.  
Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.*

This prediction seems to bring Macbeth back to reality and he demands more. He has inherited his title as Thane of Glamis, but how can he become the Thane of Cawdor? On stage, Macbeth does not know that the Thane of Cawdor has betrayed Duncan. The witches in a way which suggests that he has some power over them and control the play. However, even in this first instance, they ignore his demands and continue with their predictions.

Banquo and Macbeth confirm what they have been told and wonder whether they are hallucinating, before hearing the news of Ross and Angus. Ross and Angus announce that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor, thus confirming the witches' first prediction. However, how this is possible, Banquo is wondering how the witches knew this. Macbeth appears to have been won over by the witches:

*[Aside] Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor!  
The greatest is behind. Thanks for your pains.  
[Aside to BANQUO] Do you not hope your children shall be kings,  
When those that gave the thane of Cawdor to me  
Promised no less to them?*

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## Characterisation

We learn a lot about Macbeth and Banquo's personalities from this encounter as Macbeth finds out that the witches' first prediction for him (that he will become king) has come true, he seems to unquestioningly believe the witches' words, for any reason to doubt them. However, Banquo continues to be wise and suspicious. Both characters often tell us half-truths that lead to our destruction. He leaves the scene with Angus, leaving Macbeth to contemplate how he can make the next prediction come true, mentioning 'murder' in this soliloquy.

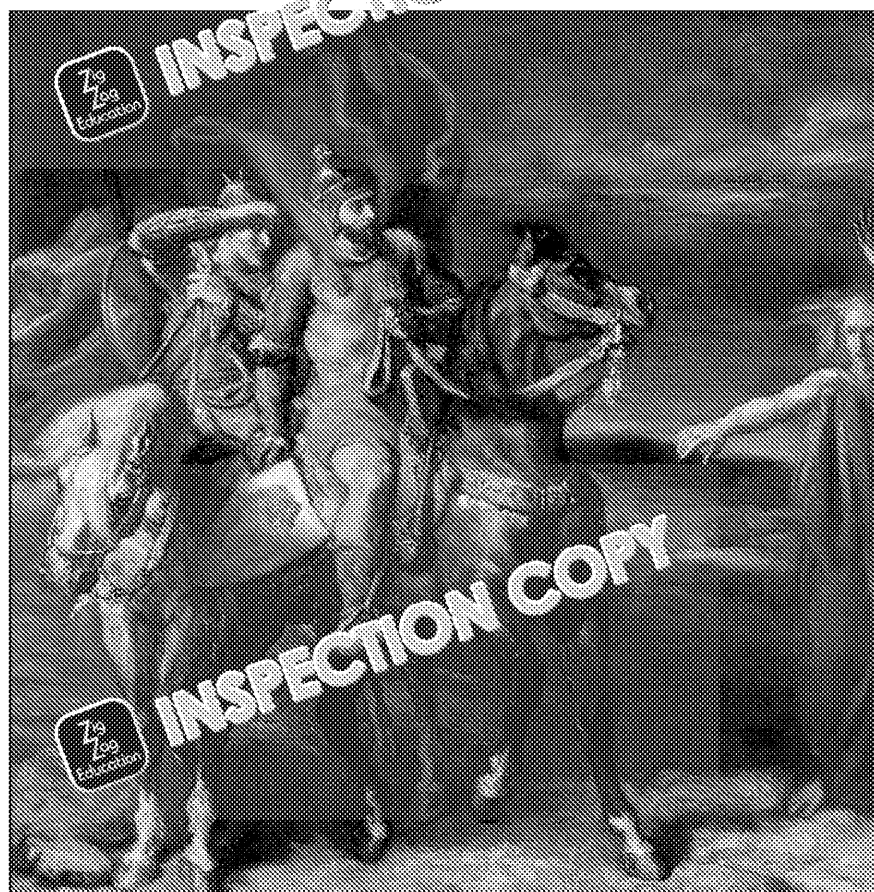
Banquo notes Macbeth's strange behaviour and suggests that it is because of his new title. Before entering the stage, Macbeth and Banquo agree to think about their experiences and meet later to discuss it.

### Debate Prompts

1. Why do you think Macbeth is so interested in Banquo's prophecy? Are there any ways in which Banquo's prophecies could later affect Macbeth?
2. Why do you think Shakespeare chose to inform the audience of Macbeth's reward before telling Macbeth himself?

### Active Learning

1. Find three examples of Banquo's language that show his suspicion.
2. Write the witches' three prophecies in your own words.
3. Find evidence in the text to support the following statements about Macbeth:
  - a) Banquo is surprised by the witches' prophecies.
  - b) Banquo does not believe the witches' prophecies.
  - c) Banquo does not believe Macbeth's prophecies.



*Macbeth and Banquo meeting the witches on the heath*  
by Théodore Chassériau

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# Act 1, Scene 4

Location: Duncan's palace at Forres

## Summary

King Duncan welcomes Macbeth and Banquo back from battle and makes

## Analysis

A trumpet announces the arrival of King Duncan and his sons and they discuss the fate of the Thane of Cawdor. Duncan remarks that it is difficult to judge men's thoughts by their appearance and expression: 'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face' (I, iv, 11–12). He goes on to say that the Thane of Cawdor was 'a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust' (I, iv, 13–14). The audience will come to wonder whether Duncan is a bad judge of character, or whether none of his thanes are worthy of trust.

Macbeth enters with Banquo, Angus and Ross. Duncan takes the opportunity to thank Macbeth for his efforts and also notes that Banquo deserves 'no less than Macbeth'. Duncan names Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and Malcolm as Duke of Cumberland, the heir to the throne. Macbeth realises that Malcolm is now an obstacle in his quest to become king and his words reveal his growing ambition:

*The prince of Cumberland! That is a step  
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,  
For in my way it lies.*

(I, iv, 41–44)

Duncan invites himself to Macbeth's castle to celebrate these appointments and to inform his wife. Macbeth and Banquo continue to discuss Macbeth's new stage, following Duncan to his castle in Inverness.

### Active Learning

Explain the obstacles Macbeth faces in his quest to become king. What are Macbeth's options?

### Debate Prompt

Do you think that the Macbeth's ambition is responsible for his actions?

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# Act 1, Scene 5

Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness

## Summary

Macbeth is reunited with his wife, Lady Macbeth, at their castle. Lady Macbeth reads the witches' predictions from a letter Macbeth has written to her, and she is now convinced that she will take care of Duncan. She tells Macbeth of her intentions and says that she will take care of him.

## Analysis

Lady Macbeth appears on stage for the first time reading a letter from Macbeth about the witches' predictions and of Macbeth's latest title.

## Characterisation

Lady Macbeth notes that Macbeth could become king but she is worried that he lacks the mean streak required to fulfil his dreams:

*Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be  
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;  
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great,  
Art not without ambition, but without  
The illness should attend it.*

Lady Macbeth believes that he wants to achieve greatness only through noble means and she tries to persuade him otherwise. Her words tell us that Macbeth has an honourable character and is a good man. They also tell us that Lady Macbeth is more ruthless than her husband and that she will be able to manipulate him to do as she wishes.

A servant reports to Lady Macbeth to tell her that the king is coming to the castle on his way to Inverness. Lady Macbeth is very happy with this arrangement and becomes clear her intention to kill Duncan. She notes the need to 'unsex' (I, v, 40) herself, as she wants to be more like a man and less like a woman – she wants to be ruthless so that she can commit murder. Lady Macbeth is, like the witches, not a typical woman.

Macbeth arrives and is immediately told of the murderous plan: 'Look like the serpent under 't' (I, v, 64–65). Here, she is instructing Macbeth to look calm and innocent about Duncan's fate, even though he is responsible. This continues the theme of deception – deception and trickery come naturally to Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth does not argue with her or question her instructions. They plan to kill Duncan but Lady Macbeth informs him that she will take care of everything, as long as he is happy and peaceful to their guests. Macbeth's compliance suggests that he is a weak character in this marriage.

### Active Learning

Find a quotation which reveals that Lady Macbeth plans to talk Macbeth into becoming king by any means necessary.

### Debate Preparation

Is Lady Macbeth  
there any ways  
strong and bra

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# Act 1, Scene 6

*Location: In the grounds of Macbeth's castle at Inverness*

## Summary

King Duncan and his men arrive at Macbeth's castle and are welcomed by

## Analysis

### Setting

King Duncan arrives at the castle accompanied by his sons, Banquo, Macduff and Malcolm. They discuss how Macbeth's castle is and how they have always liked it. Banquo is always surrounded by birds and suggests that this is because they like the surroundings: 'Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed, / The air comes in stark contrast to the 'filthy air' (1, i, 12) that is continually referred to.

Lady Macbeth enters and Duncan thanks her for her hospitality and apologises for their arrival. She remarks that her hospitality is due to her gratitude for Macbeth's status. She tells them that they should make themselves at home and enjoy the castle where Macbeth is and ask to be taken to him.

### Theme – appearance and reality

Duncan's naivety and Lady Macbeth's skilfulness at playing the welcoming scene, as is the theme of the gulf of difference between appearances and reality. Remembering that Lady Macbeth's success in making the hostess is indicated as good and right. She knows the right thing to say to Duncan because she knows his generosity, and yet she is still plotting on her plot to kill him. Her real feelings are hidden from the feelings that she shows towards her guests. Lady Macbeth appears to be a perfect hostess but her conscience is at the point in the play.

### Context (AO4)

In both this scene and Scene 7, we are invited to consider gender roles and the relationship between man and wife. The different interpretations of these interactions when considering the role of women in society at different times in history. Lady Macbeth's behaviour towards King Duncan is also telling of what the socially acceptable behaviour was at the time the play was written. She is an interesting character because she knows how to do her best to pretend to, but underneath she is far from conventional.

### Active Learning

1. Find examples of things/people that appear to be more pleasant than they actually are.
2. Find two quotations to show Lady Macbeth's skilfulness as a hostess, despite her intentions.

### Debate

What are the differences between appearance and reality?  
What effect does this have on the play?

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# Act 1, Scene 7

Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness

## Summary

Macbeth has doubts about the plan to murder King Duncan and expresses his concerns. Lady Macbeth mocks and belittles him, suggesting that he is not a real man unless he follows the plan as agreed. In the end, Macbeth agrees to do as his wife says, and carries out the murder of the king.

## Analysis

Macbeth enters the stage alone and considers his wife's suggestions. He asks himself if he could be sure that he would not be punished for it, but he knows that he cannot. Macbeth notes that Duncan trusts him not only as a subject but also as a friend. In addition, Duncan is his guest and so Macbeth should be protecting him from harm, not murdering him himself. Macbeth realises that Duncan is a noble and honourable man, and that his death would be missed by his subjects. Macbeth realises that only his ambition is spurring him on. 'To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which / o'erleaps itself, and falls below the / th' other' (I, vii, 25–28). He means that his senses tell him it is the wrong thing to do, but his excessive ambition can lead to downfall.

Lady Macbeth enters and tells Macbeth that the king is wondering where he is. She explains to her that he cannot go on with the plan. She chastises him for his weakness and tells him that he can only do what it is proper to do to become king: 'I dare do all that / others dares do more is none' (I, vii, 46–47). At this point, she suggests that it is unbecomingly underhand tactics.

Lady Macbeth argues that Macbeth was in fact a man when he was willing to do anything to become king. She suggests that if he is not doing so, it would make him a coward. She suggests that such a plan is necessary. Macbeth explains to Lady Macbeth how they could kill Duncan by plotting to frame some servants and, with a seemingly foolproof plan in place,

*I am settled, and bend up  
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.  
Away, and mock the time with fairest show:  
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.*

### Active Learning

1. Find further examples of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's opinions on masculinity and femininity – write down the quotations that show these views.
2. List three reasons for Macbeth's doubts about killing Duncan.

### Debate Prompt

1. What is the difference between a man and a woman with his courage?
2. Why do you think Lady Macbeth is so determined to please her ambition?

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## Act 2

### Act 2, Scene 1

*Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness*

#### Summary

Banquo and his son, Fleance, are awake late at night. When they encounter Macbeth walking through the castle, they talk briefly about the three witches before Macbeth prepares himself for the gruesome task that he has agreed to carry out – the murder of the king.

#### Analysis

Banquo arrives on stage with Fleance. He is tired and cannot sleep. He is interrupted and startled by Macbeth and a servant. Banquo tells Macbeth that the king is already sleeping but has sent him to give a diamond to Lady Macbeth to thank her for her hospitality. Banquo mentions the witches, who have interrupted his dreams. Macbeth lies to Banquo by telling him that he no longer thinks of the witches. He then contradicts himself by saying that Banquo should stick close to him in order to reap rewards when he is the king. Banquo appears to have some inkling of Macbeth's bad intention. He says:

*So I lose none  
In seeking to augment it, but still keep  
My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,  
I shall be counselled.*

He means that he will stay loyal to Macbeth, as long as he is behaving honestly. Fleance exits and Macbeth sends his servant to bed. Macbeth is left alone to give this a dagger which I see before me (II, i, 49). In this speech, he hallucinates and sees a dagger leading him to Duncan's room. He considers whether he is hallucinating or if the dagger is real. He repeatedly asks himself why he can see the dagger but cannot touch it. He considers whether the witches are playing a trick on him. This speech shows Macbeth's turmoil about what he is about to do. He wonders whether Macbeth is seeing things because of the pressure he is under or if the witches are responsible for the vision, as they attempt to encourage Macbeth to commit the murder.

#### Language and style

The lines 53–57 convey vividly Macbeth's personification of murder as a withered creature stalking his victim:

*... withered murder,  
Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,  
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost.*

This metaphor may in turn be linked with the role of the witches throughout the play. Macbeth is in a hurry because the more he talks, the more worried he becomes: 'Words to the deed, first, then the deed itself' (II, i, 62). Macbeth's language shows increasing anxiety and fear.

A bell rings and Macbeth takes this as his invitation to act. Duncan's fate is sealed: 'I go and it is done, the bell invites me' (II, i, 63). The bell informs Macbeth that the king is asleep. He takes it as a sign that it is the right moment to make his final decision.



#### Essay question

At this stage, do you think Banquo has any idea of what Macbeth is planning? Or do you think that Banquo has chosen the right course of action, or do you think he should have done more?

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# Act 2, Scene 2

Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness

## Summary

Macbeth has murdered King Duncan and is already beginning to feel guilty. Lady Macbeth tells him to stop being a coward and to wash the blood from his hands which is now on the king's room.

## Analysis

Lady Macbeth enters the stage and remarks: 'That which hath made them drunk' (II, ii, 1). She is referring to the alcohol that she has given to Duncan's servants. Lady Macbeth has drunk a little of it to make her brave and ready for the deed. She is excited about Duncan's murder and entertained by the irony of the guards who are so drunk that it is impossible to tell whether they are living or dead. She hears the guards and worries that her husband has been interrupted in his task. She had wanted

Macbeth enters and announces: 'I have done the deed' (II, ii, 15) before asking the guards to wake up (II, ii, 15). He is already paranoid about what he has done, wondering who is still asleep. Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth that the servants woke up while he was praying. Their prayers and went back to sleep. Macbeth struggled to say 'Amen' and then

... it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the house.  
'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor  
Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more.'

This threat will haunt Macbeth throughout the rest of the play.

## Characterisation

Macbeth is clearly troubled by what he has just done, suggesting that he is keenly aware of the horrific nature of his actions. Lady Macbeth takes control of the situation with sensible and practical instructions. She tells him to wash his hands and chastises him for bringing the daggers back to his chamber with him. Lady Macbeth seems to be much calmer, braver and more ruthless than Macbeth at this point in the play.

### Active Learning

1. Write a list of the actions needed to set the scene for the actions that Lady Macbeth takes.
2. Write a description of Macbeth before he committed the crime. In what ways does he change?

## Theme – guilt

Macbeth refuses to return to Duncan's chamber because he cannot bring himself to face the crime he has committed, showing that he feels a measure of guilt. Lady Macbeth returns the daggers back to the scene of the crime. She exits the stage, while a knock is heard. Macbeth is terrified of the noise and disgusted by the blood on his hands. He asks, 'Will these hands ever wash this blood / Clean from my hand?' (II, ii, 52-53) and decides that it will never be able to wash away the guilt of Duncan's murder and this metaphor continues throughout the play. When Macbeth returns and calls him coward, later in the play she is the one who becomes deranged by her actions. Macbeth, while Macbeth excuses himself to his feelings of guilt. Lady Macbeth confesses that she would have killed Duncan herself but was unable to because he reminded her of her father – perhaps this is a rare acknowledgement of some degree of a guilty conscience in Lady Macbeth.

### Debate Prompt

Do you think Lady Macbeth is a villain or a victim? Do you think she is or is not?

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## Act 2, Scene 3

*Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness*

### Summary

Macduff arrives early at the castle to wake King Duncan and discovers the murder. Macbeth feigns shock and grief, and Macbeth admits to killing the guards in his sleep. Malcolm and Donalbain, decide to flee as they don't know who they can trust.

### Analysis

A porter appears on stage. He is clearly drunk and conducts an imaginary conversation with the gatekeeper. This delays his ability to answer the knocking and frustrates the other characters who continue to knock loudly. Eventually, the door is opened to Macduff and Lennox. Macbeth is so long to answer. The porter admits that he has been drinking and gives a detailed account of the effects of drink. Macbeth arrives, as if he has been woken by the knocking. Macduff is here to wake Duncan, who requested to be woken early, and leaves the stage. Macbeth tells Macduff about the bad weather the previous night, before Macduff returns to the castle.

*Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope  
The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence  
The life o' th' building!*

He confuses his friends by referring to Duncan's body as 'the Lord's anointed'. This refers to the belief in the divine right of kings. During the reign of James I, who was written, there was a general belief that kings were awarded their right to rule by God's will. This, any attack on the king was considered to be an attack on God's will.

Macduff tells his friends to see for themselves, while he wakes the rest of the king. He enters and demands to know what is going on. Macduff won't tell her because he is shocked but quickly changes his mind when Banquo arrives on the stage. Macduff tells her that Macbeth has killed Duncan. Macbeth's death highlights perceptions of women at the time as being more suspicious than men.

All of the key characters return to the stage and explain to Malcolm and Donalbain what has happened. Macbeth reveals that he killed the guilty servants in a fit of rage. Macduff is immediately suspicious, asking Macbeth 'Wherefore did you so?' (II, iii, 109) but Macbeth claims that it is not possible to think logically when you are so upset. Lady Macbeth adds to the pretence of their upset by fainting. Whether this is a genuine swoon or deliberate is unclear, but it certainly works on this level.

Malcolm and Donalbain quietly discuss matters and decide to leave the castle quickly, fearing that they may be in danger from their supposed friends. They are left on stage as the other men retire to their chambers to dress properly before meeting to solve this 'massacre' (II, iii, 134). Malcolm and Donalbain decide to leave Scotland until they can decide who is to blame for their father's death. At this moment in time, they feel unable to trust anybody. Donalbain notes, 'The near in blood, / The nearer bloody' (II, iii, 142–143), meaning that their closest relatives are probably the biggest threat to them.



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## Context (AO4)

Malcolm and Donalbain's fears for their lives highlight the differences between Shakespeare's day and present-day society. Today we would rely on the police to find who was responsible for a crime and we would trust societal bodies to ensure that good triumphs over evil, that all individuals are protected. Malcolm and Donalbain are forced to take things into their own hands, which also reveals much about the attitude towards kingship in Shakespeare's day.

The horrified reaction to King Duncan's death is indicative of the status of monarchy in the time it was written. In addition, Shakespeare was a particular favourite of the variety of monarchs it encompassed and so it was important that a great deal of respect was shown to the king.



### Active Learning

1. Name three characters that seem a little suspicious of Macbeth in this scene. For each character, explain why you think they are suspicious and give a quotation.
2. Explain why the weather is described as wild and stormy on the night of Duncan's murder. What literary technique is Shakespeare using here?
3. Imagine that you are investigating Duncan's murder. Draw a mind map of the key suspects and any **evidence** against them. You could also think about who might benefit from Duncan's death, e.g. his son, who should now become king, and present some theories of who could be responsible.

### Debate Prompt

Do you think Lady Macbeth is guilty or not?



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## Act 2, Scene 4

*Location: Inverness – Outside Macbeth's castle*

### Summary

Ross, an old man and Macduff discuss recent events. Macduff tells Ross the suggesting that they might be guilty of the murder. Ross tells him that Mac is the new king of Scotland.

### Analysis

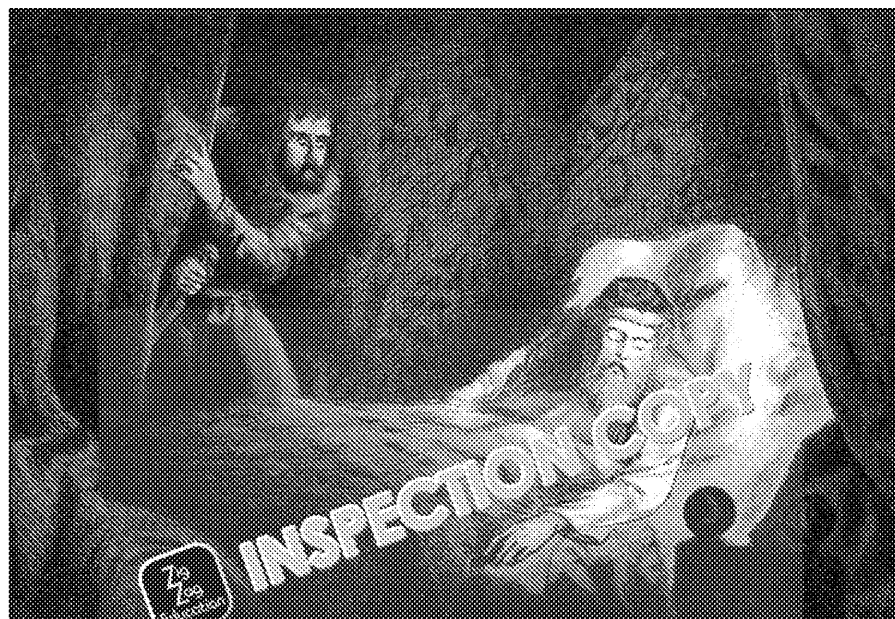
#### Setting

Ross enters the stage accompanied by an old man. They discuss King Duncan's terrible weather. The old man suggests that the weather is 'unnatural, / Evil' (II, iv, 10–11), making a direct comparison between the weather and the events upon with accounts of other bizarre and unnatural events that have taken place. These supernatural events remind the audience of the supernatural present in the whole of the play. Shakespeare highlights the unnatural and grotesque by reflecting it in the unnatural weather and strange events in nature.

Macduff enters the stage and they discuss Duncan's death. Macduff suggests that the men were paid to commit the crime and that 'suspicion of the deed' (II, iv, 27) is on Donalbain because they have mysteriously fled Scotland. The men admit that it was for them to do.

Macduff informs the men that Macbeth has been named as the new king and will be crowned, while Duncan's body has been placed in his ancestral tomb. Macduff is his family in Fife but Ross decides to go to the coronation in Scone.

The scene ends with the men discussing the future of Scotland. It is a new reign as a new phase in Scottish history and one that they are worried about. Ross says 'How robes sit upon that new whorl!' (II, iv, 38), meaning that he hopes things will



Macbeth preparing to murder King Duncan

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## Act 3

### Act 3, Scene 1

*Location: The Royal Palace at Forres*

#### Summary

Banquo begins to have suspicions about Macbeth and Macbeth fears the witches gave Banquo, namely that his sons would be kings. Macbeth persuades him to murder both Banquo and Fleance.

#### Analysis

Banquo enters the stage thinking about the witches' prophecies. He notes that they have fulfilled their prophecies for him but he fears that Macbeth 'played' them most. He wonders whether the prophecy that the witches made for him will come true.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth enter as king and queen, accompanied by Lennox and other lords and ladies. Banquo stops what he has been saying and does not share his suspicions. Macbeth and his wife address Banquo as their 'chief guest' (III, i, 11) and so Banquo enjoys their celebrations without him. They invite him to a banquet that evening for the rest of the afternoon. Banquo tells them that he will be out riding before the feast. Macbeth asks if Fleance will go with him, Banquo confirms. Banquo departs. Macbeth instructs the rest of his guests to do as they please and all depart, leaving Macbeth alone with one of his servants.

The servant informs Macbeth that the men that they have previously discovered are at the castle. Macbeth sends the servant to bring them to him, while he ponders Banquo. He wonders whether Banquo's prophecy will come true and, if it does, 'For Banquo's issue have I filled my mind' (III, i, 64). He means that he has thought about it, just as Banquo's sons can be king. This angers Macbeth and he decides to kill them.

The servant returns to the stage with two murderers. It becomes apparent from these men that Banquo is responsible for a catalogue of wrongs done to them. Macbeth explains that he cannot kill their mutual foe because of his position and his friends that he shares with Banquo. It is, therefore, their responsibility to help Macbeth and are instructed to kill both Banquo and Fleance, when they are night away from the palace. The murderers leave the stage, closely following Banquo.

#### Characterisation

Significantly, although Lady Macbeth is present in the first part of this scene, she appears to have deferred responsibility to her husband now she has achieved her goal of queen. Macbeth is now making plans and taking murderous action alone, without her guidance. Now that he has been made king, as the witches foretold, he has become more arrogant.

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#### Active Learning

Describe the tactics that Macbeth uses to persuade the murderers to kill Banquo. What does his approach tell you about his character and about how he has changed?

#### Debate Prompt

1. How is Banquo's prophecy fulfilled? And how does Macbeth react?
2. What is Lady Macbeth's role in the murder of Banquo? Do you think she is responsible?

## Act 3, Scene 2

*Location: The Royal Palace at Forres*

### Summary

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth discuss their troubled minds following the murder of King Duncan. Macbeth puts on a good show at the banquet later and Macbeth reveals that he will continue to rule Scotland, but does not share the details of this with Lady Macbeth, however.

### Analysis

Lady Macbeth discusses Banquo's whereabouts with a servant. She sends Macbeth a letter from Banquo to consider what they have done:

*Naught's had, all's spent,  
Where our desire is got without content.  
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy  
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.*

With this speech, she seems to suggest that it is better to be murdered than to be so troubled by the guilt. This refers to her concern for her husband. Macbeth's reaction to Lady Macbeth's speech shows a side to Lady Macbeth that the audience has never seen before. She is able to take control of her emotions and urges Macbeth to do the same.

### Theme – guilt

Macbeth appears and Lady Macbeth tells him off for being unhappy, telling him to 'be a man' (III, ii, 13). Macbeth discusses their nightmares and emotional torment. He wonders how Duncan can now sleep peacefully when he cannot. He fears that what he has done is far away from him, perhaps because of his knowledge of how easily someone else can be murdered. Duncan's death is still present in his mind and his language and image are dark and supernatural. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth realise that the murder of Duncan has not achieved their happiness; in fact it has made them change the subject and begin to discuss the night ahead.

They agree on the need to put on brave faces for their guests and Macbeth pays particular attention to Banquo. He does not involve her in the plan to kill him, but he does suspect what Macbeth has planned but he does not tell her, preferring her 'separate knowledge' (III, ii, 48).

### Characterisation

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's interaction in this scene suggests that they are both concerned for each other. Lady Macbeth is concerned for Macbeth's emotional well-being and Macbeth is concerned for her 'innocence' by not telling her about his plans for further murder. He also shows affection towards her, calling her 'love', 'dear wife' and 'dearest chuck'.

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#### Active Learning

Make a list of any words or phrases in this scene that make you think of the witches or the supernatural.



#### Debate Prompt

How do you think Macbeth will react to the witches' prophecy? Has he been deceived, or not?

## Act 3, Scene 3

*Location: A field near to the royal palace*

### Summary

The murderers attack and kill Banquo, as Macbeth has instructed – but Fleance escapes.

### Analysis

The murderers enter the stage and are joined by a third man. They wonder whether they should kill the third man but he explains that he has been sent by Macbeth. The men discuss when Banquo will come and then hear him in the distance. The audience hears Banquo shouting offstage: 'Give us a light there, ho' (III, iii, 9). It is important to remember that, once again, evil is occurring under the cover of darkness. In addition, Banquo seems to realise the dangers that could exist in the darkness.

Banquo and Fleance enter the stage. Banquo makes a remark about the weather to the murderers. The rain is mentioned and one of the murderers says 'let it come' promoting the links between bad weather and evil. Banquo realises that he must get his son to flee. Banquo is killed but Fleance escapes.

The murderers realise that they have failed in part of their task but retire, knowing that Banquo has been killed.

### Debate Prompt

Why is it significant that Banquo is killed?  
predict the outcome of the play

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## Act 3, Scene 4

*Location: A banquet hall in the royal palace*

### Summary

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth welcome lords and noblemen to a banquet. Macbeth has been murdered and Fleance escaped. He then sees the ghost of Banquo at his dinner table to his horror. Lady Macbeth tries to explain Macbeth's strange behaviour but eventually, by shouting at the ghost, she sends the guests away.

### Analysis

Macbeth enters the stage, which has been set up like a banquet hall. He enters with lords and noblemen. He addresses the guests before the first murderer arrives. The first murderer tells Macbeth of Banquo's death, but also informs him that Fleance has escaped. Macbeth knows Banquo has been killed but worries about Fleance, although he notes that:

*... The worm that's fled  
Hath nature that in time will venom breed;  
No teeth for'th present.*

He means that while Fleance has the potential to pose him problems, he will not pose any problems now. Macbeth knows that he has some time to decide what to do about Fleance.

The murderer exits and Lady Macbeth summons Macbeth back to the table. As Macbeth sits down, Banquo's ghost enters the room and sits in Macbeth's place. When Macbeth looks down, he is badly, wondering who is to blame for it. He then starts talking to the ghost. He tells the ghost that he is unwell and invites the guests to leave but Lady Macbeth assures him that Macbeth is fine. Macbeth, such as he has suffered from since his coronation, and invites the guests to ignore Macbeth's behaviour.

Lady Macbeth assures Macbeth that there is no ghost; she tells him: 'This is the very air' (3.4.61), meaning it is a hallucination caused by his fear. Once again, she tells Macbeth to put on a brave face. Macbeth does not believe her and continues to speak to the ghost. The ghost vanishes. Macbeth is forced to compose himself and addresses his guests, continuing his diagnosis of his strange behaviour.

Banquo's ghost reappears and returns to Macbeth's seat. On seeing it, Macbeth shouts at it and demands that it return in any other form. He claims that he is not afraid of anything, only the form that this spirit chooses to take. When the ghost vanishes again, Macbeth addresses his guests as if they have seen it too. Lady Macbeth asks the guests to leave quickly, telling them that their questions make him worse. She is worried that Macbeth will say something incriminating. When they have all left, Macbeth discusses his plans with his wife. He wants to know why Macduff has refused to join them, wondering if he is suspicious of Macbeth. He also plans to go to see the three witches.



Macbeth  
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## Theme – the supernatural

In this scene, Macbeth is again strongly affected by some kind of supernatural force. The influence of the witches can be felt throughout the whole play. Macbeth appeared to be goaded into killing Duncan by a vision of a floating dagger; in this scene he is forced into undignified and eccentric behaviour in public by the appearance of a ghost. Are these visions the result of Macbeth's troubled mind, or the work of the witches?

### Active Learning

1. List three things that are worrying Macbeth in this scene.
2. Imagine you were a nobleman present at Macbeth's banquet. Write an eye witness report of what happened. Discuss possible explanations for Macbeth's behaviour. Do you believe Lady Macbeth's explanation? Why / why not?



### Debate Prompt

Which crime do you think is worse: the murder of Banquo or the murder of Duncan? Give reasons for your answer.

## Act 3 Scene 5

Location: A deserted heath

### Summary

The three witches meet with their queen, Hecate. They plan another meeting with Macbeth.

### Analysis

There is a crash of thunder and then the three witches enter the stage with them for their dealings with Macbeth. In particular, she is angry with them for their target. She calls him '... a wayward son, spiteful and wrathful...' (III, v), somebody as evil as Hecate still finds fault with Macbeth's behaviour.

She is not happy that the witches have not included her in their dealings with them to meet with him again. She does not specify what she will do to him but that something dreadful will happen to Macbeth.

### Language

Hecate is summoned away by singing of a song. The three witches leave to return. Once again, the witches speak in rhyming couplets, like an incantation, a difference to the more natural language of the play.

### Debate Prompt

At this point in the play, do you think Macbeth is responsible for his own actions, or is he the victim of the witches' evil plotting? Give reasons for your answer.

### Active Learning

List three reasons why Macbeth is responsible for his own actions.

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## Act 3, Scene 6

*Location: Near to the Royal Palace at Forres*

### Summary

Lennox and another Scottish lord discuss what has happened in Scotland: where he is joining forces with the English king and Duncan's son, Malcolm, hopes that Scotland will soon be freed from the tyrannical rule of Macbeth.

### Analysis

Lennox enters the stage with another lord and they discuss the events of the previous scene. Lennox wants to hear how Macbeth's actions are being perceived beyond the castle. We learn that Banquo has been blamed on Fleance because he has now fled Scotland. Lennox is in support of Macbeth's handling of the murders of Banquo and Duncan but expresses his disbelief in what he says: 'Was not that nobly done? Ay, and wisely too' (1.1.110). Macbeth had to kill the guards because people could not bear to hear the truth. His staunch and perhaps excessive defence of Macbeth could be seen as a reflection of his concerns.

The lord informs Lennox that Malcolm is with the king of England and that he will go to request the king of England's help in a battle against Macbeth. Macbeth is aware of Macduff's plans and is preparing for war.

Macbeth has summoned Macduff to Scotland but Macduff refused to go. Macbeth hopes Macduff returns to free Scotland sooner rather than later. He refers to Macduff as a traitor.

### Context (AO4)

This scene is set in a society that has descended into suspicion and that present-day audiences can easily identify with. When something bad is unknown, it is impossible to know who is trustworthy and who is not. It is difficult to know the wrong person or people and this is a feature common in contemporary news and cinema.

#### Active Learning

1. List three problems – as described by Macbeth.
  2. Who has Macduff fought against Macbeth?
- Draw up a list of Macbeth's enemies.

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## Act 4

### Act 4, Scene 1

*Location: A cavern in a deserted place*

#### Summary

Macbeth meets with the three witches and their queen, Hecate. The witch apparitions as clues to what the future holds. Macbeth is comforted by so others.

#### Analysis

##### Setting

Thunder strikes and the three witches enter the stage, which has been set up to look like a cavern. There is a boiling cauldron in the centre of the stage. Again, the setting of the scene highlights the evil intentions of the witches. This is one of the most famous and powerful scenes of the play and centres around the three witches casting a spell for Macbeth. The fantastical ingredients put into the cauldron are sickening and grotesque, like the witches themselves, who Macbeth has chosen as advisors.

The most powerful of all evil spirits, Hecate, is there to oversee the arrival of Macbeth. He arrives with three other witches and together they sing a spell. Macbeth's presence is foretold by the cauldron.



*By the pricking of my thumbs,  
Something wicked this way comes.* (IV, i, 59–60)

#### Characterisation

It is interesting to note that Macbeth is not referred to by his name but as a 'wicked thing'. Macbeth has become as wicked and evil as the witches but he is oblivious to his demise. He is so deluded and self-obsessed that he seems to believe he is important enough to command the respect of the witches, even though his greeting implies he has no respect for them. Macbeth demands answers from the witches, who offer him the chance to get answers from their master. This plays to Macbeth's arrogance, making him feel worthy of dealing with the most important people.

The first of three apparitions appears; it is an armed head and Macbeth is warned to beware Macduff. This merely confirms his previous instinct. Macbeth commands that the apparition stays but it leaves.

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The warning given by the next apparition, a bloody child, is that Macbeth need not fear anyone born of a woman. This puts Macbeth's mind at rest a little but he resolves to kill Macduff anyway, just to settle himself.

The third apparition is a crowned child, carrying a tree. It tells him that he will not be defeated 'until Great Birnam Wood / High Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him' (IV, i, 103-108). Macbeth takes this cryptic message as a confirmation of his own invulnerability but still he demands to know the answer to the question that is burning in his mind: 'Will Banquo's children become kings?' (IV, i, 109).

The witches tell Macbeth 'Seek to know no more!' (IV, i, 118) but he is insistent and even curses them for denying him this knowledge. It is strange that Macbeth thinks that he could curse

these already cursed creatures. When Macbeth's wishes are met, eight kings walk across the stage followed by the ghost of Banquo. Macbeth is furious, he turns on the witches because they didn't give him the answers he wanted to hear but this makes little impression on them and they simply vanish, refusing to meet any more of his demands. This provokes

him to exclaim 'damn'd be all that trust them' (IV, i, 155). This is very poignant because Macbeth does not listen to his own advice, so blinded is he to what he has become.

#### Context (A04)

The witches fail to give Macbeth the answers that he is looking for and he loses his temper with them. He seems to believe that he has the power to order them to do things and this provides us with a reminder of the social order in Shakespeare's day. It should also provide contemporary audiences with food for thought. Should groups or individuals that exist outside of mainstream society be expected to follow accepted codes of behaviour?

By this point, Lennox has entered the stage with news that Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth is annoyed that he did not kill Macduff as soon as he thought of it but decides to have his family and servants killed as soon as possible. Now we can see (if we hadn't noticed before) that Macbeth has no restraint or forethought for the consequences of his actions. He does not realise that he *is* king.

#### Active Learning

1. List three of the questions we learn that the witches put to Macbeth and their answers.
2. In your own words, describe the apparitions' predictions and what they mean to Macbeth.
3. Can you think of any other way to interpret the apparitions?

#### Debate Prompt

Macbeth mistakenly trusts the witches. Can you find evidence that Macbeth mistakes them?

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## Act 4, Scene 2

*Location: Macduff's castle at Fife*

### Summary

Lady Macduff fears for her safety and asks Ross why her husband has left. Soon after Ross leaves, murderers arrive and brutally murder Lady Macduff. Lady Macduff runs for her life.

### Analysis

This scene is a very important one for Lady Macduff and her son in deep discussion with Ross. Ross tells her that Macduff has fled to England, leaving her and her son alone. Ross tries to convince her not to follow him, but she does not accept that it was wise for him to leave. If he feared for his safety, surely he would have stayed. Ross tries to reassure Lady Macduff but suggests that she leaves the castle. Lady Macduff observes that 'Our fears do make us traitors' (IV, ii, 4), because as loyal subjects of their king, instead they are afraid of him and fear his unpredictable actions.

Lady Macduff tells her son that his father is dead but he does not believe her. His son asks various questions about treachery and crimes before coming to the conclusion that 'liars and swearers enough to beat the honest men and hang up them' (IV, ii, 10).

Just then a messenger appears informing Lady Macduff that she and her son must leave. The messenger leaves and Lady Macduff wonders why she should leave when she is innocent. She realises that with the current state of the country, being innocent is not enough. It is too late... the murderers enter the room.

The murderers ask where Macduff is and both Lady Macduff and her son are killed. Lady Macduff's son is killed and Lady Macduff exits the stage, followed by the murderers.

### Context (A)

Lady Macduff's presence in the play reminds the audience of the more sensitive side of Macbeth. She is helpless and powerless. She has no control over her fate, her actions and makes no attempt to save herself from death. It is interesting to see how this ideal female character is altered in more modern adaptations of the play to reflect the conventions of the day.

### Characterisation

The slaughter of Macduff's innocent family is a new low in Macbeth's violence, showing just how brutal Macbeth has become and suggests that he is out of control and in a state of desperation with no rational thought or consideration for consequences.

#### Active Learning

Make a list of all the people Macbeth has killed, either with his own hands or by ordering others to commit murder. Which of these crimes do you think is the worst, and why?

#### Debate Prompt

This scene provides a turning point in the play. Why do you think this scene is so important?

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# Act 4 Scene 3

Location: The royal palace in England

## Summary

Macduff and King Duncan's son, Malcolm, meet at the English court. They when they finally agree to trust each other they plan a joint attack against destroying Scotland. Macduff hears from Ross the terrible news that his wife brutally murdered and he vows to avenge their deaths.

## Analysis

Malcolm and Macduff enter the stage. The audience have just witnessed the murder of King Duncan but he is not yet aware of it. The men discuss the situation in Scotland in terms of 'It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds' (IV, i).

The two men feel that Macbeth's tyranny is ravaging Scotland and they do not want to live under it. It is clear that the two men do not know whether to trust each other. The king, who used to gain power has created an atmosphere of fear where nobody is allowed to speak. Malcolm feels the need to test Macduff's loyalty before he can accept him as a man as unfit to rule Scotland as Macbeth himself: lustful, greedy and cruel. Macduff expresses his horror and regret that the son of such a good king and queen should not be a more worthy candidate for leadership, does Malcolm reveal his plans to fight Macbeth.

Both have been honest and good men in the past, but both men are usually loyal to the king. Malcolm points out that 'A good and virtuous nature only recoil / In an imperial charge' (IV, i, 179). This means that honest men do not like to see the king in a bad position. Malcolm can he trust that Macduff is not working for Macbeth? Eventually, the men agree to fight together against the tyrant, Macbeth.

## Context (AO4)

When Malcolm and Macduff meet to discuss the fate of Scotland under it, they are reminded of the differences between Shakespeare's society and their own. They try to stress their allegiances to Scotland, before they begin to plan Macbeth's downfall. In their society they are usually loyal to the king but cannot stand by and let Macbeth destroy the country. Patriotism and respect for the monarchy would be much less valued in today's society. In Shakespeare's day it was very important. This exchange would have been very important to King James.

Ross enters the stage and Macduff enquires about the fate of his family. Ross tells him 'at peace' (IV, iii, 179) when he left them but eventually admits that he has just heard that the castle has been attacked and Macduff's family have been slaughtered. Malcolm suggests that Macduff deals with the grief by taking revenge: 'Let's make our revenge / To cure this deadly grief' (IV, iii, 214–215).

He suggests that avenging their deaths and taking back Scotland will be the best cure for Macduff's grief and they leave the stage to meet with King Edward of England and plan their attack.

### Debate Prompt

Do you think Malcolm would or not?

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## Act 5

### Act 5, Scene 1

*Location: A room in Dunsinane Castle*

#### Summary

A doctor has been called to attend to 'Lady Macbeth, who has started to walk strangely of her nightmares.

#### Analysis

The scene opens with a gentlewoman and a doctor, who are discussing the condition of Lady Macbeth. We learn that 'since his majesty went into the field' (V, i, 4) Lady Macbeth has been sleepwalking and talking in her sleep about things that the gentlewoman could not repeat. As they continue to discuss it, Lady Macbeth enters the room. Lady Macbeth re-enacts conversations that she had with her husband on the nights of Duncan and Banquo's murders. These are overheard by the doctor and the gentlewoman:

*Out, damned spot! out, I say! One – two – why, then 'tis time to do 't. - Hell is murky! - Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?—Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? [...]* The thane of Fife had a wife - where is she now?  
*What, will these hands ne'er be clean?—No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that; you mar all with this fantasy.* (V, i, 23–33)

She repeats the state of mind she made to Macbeth earlier, that: 'what's done cannot be undone' (V, i, 65), but now this has a hollow ring to it. It has had consequences for the lives of everyone involved. Where it previously appeared to allow them to carry on with their lives as normal, it now seems to suggest that they can't.

The doctor explains that 'Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles'. Lady Macbeth's strange behaviour has been caused by something unnatural. Sleepwalking was considered a highly abnormal activity. The doctor suggests that Lady Macbeth needs a priest to unburden her mind: 'More needs she' (V, i, 72). He recommends that the gentlewoman keep a close eye on Lady Macbeth anything that she might use to cause herself harm.

#### Characterisation

Lady Macbeth has been absent from the action of the play for some time. The degeneration in her state of mind, especially by her compulsion to wash her hands, shows her role in her marriage as well as in the play. It is interesting to note that the doctor speaks in prose, rather than the formal speech of the nobility, and that Lady Macbeth

#### Active Learning

Choose a quotation from this scene and one from earlier in the play and use these to explain the change in Lady Macbeth.

#### Debate Prompt

1. In what ways does Lady Macbeth's character change in Act 5?
2. What do you think of Lady Macbeth's actions in Act 5?

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## Act 5, Scene 2

*Location: The countryside somewhere near Dunsinane castle*

### Summary

Soldiers march towards Dunsinane, preparing for battle against Macbeth.

### Analysis

Menteith, Caithness, Angus and others enter the stage, alongside soldiers carrying flags. They discuss the imminent battle with Malcolm. It is now common knowledge that Macbeth was responsible for the various murders that have taken place: 'Now does he feel / His secret murders sticking on his hands' (V, ii, 16–17). This quotation is particularly relevant because the image of having blood on one's hands is one that is used by both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth earlier in the play.

Malcolm and Macduff have brought an army from England and are aided by Malcolm's English uncle, Siward. Menteith remarks:

*Revenge burn in them, for their dear causes  
Would to the bleeding and the grim alarm  
Excite the mortified man.*

He means that the men are desperate for revenge and that the wrongs they would be enough to raise the dead back to life, in order to wreak revenge that Donalbain is responsible for his brother.

They discuss the fact that Macbeth is fortifying his castle and question his that he is out of control. It is interesting to see that not all of Scotland has Macbeth still has followers, but they 'move only in command / Nothing in hanging on to his kingship by a thread, with only his belief in the witches' confident in his victory.

### Structure

This scene, and the scenes that follow, are very short. The sudden change in the fast-paced action all build tension and add to the sense that events are moving towards a final climax.

#### Active Learning

1. List three of the negative qualities attributed to Macbeth.
2. Macbeth is said to be 'like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief' (V, ii, 21–22). What does this mean?

#### Debate Prompt

Are there any points where you realise what is going on to the witches' prophecies?

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## Act 5, Scene 3

*Location: A room in the castle at Dunsinane*

### Summary

Macbeth hears that a huge army is approaching the castle. He talks to the doctor about his illness and then he prepares himself for the battle that lies ahead.

### Analysis

Macbeth is on stage, accompanied by a doctor, attendants and a servant. He is preparing for attack but he has nothing to fear because of what he has learned from the witches' prophecies. Macbeth's men clearly do not know what he is talking about as he is an isolated character in this scene. His men seem to fear him and the unfortunate news that an army of 10,000 men has gathered to fight him wears him down. In other words he is obviously terrified. Macbeth puts on his armour and says 'my flesh be hacked' (V, iii, 31) – he will fight until there is no flesh left on his body.

Macbeth asks the doctor about his wife's health. The doctor advises him that she is troubled by images that are stopping her from sleeping. Macbeth's reaction is one of

*Cure her of that.  
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?*

Macbeth does not believe what the doctor tells him. As we can see from the text, he demands that the doctor find her a cure. Macbeth seems to believe that he can control science.

Macbeth does nothing to help his wife. Instead, he puts on his armour and goes to battle with Malcolm. The men are clearly terrified.

#### Active Learning

Find a quotation that shows a more human side to Macbeth. Explain how it shows this.



#### Debate Prompt

Why do you think Macbeth believes the witches have told him the truth? Does he appear to be quite convinced?

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## Act 5, Scene 4

*Location: In the countryside near to Birnam Wood*

### Summary

Malcolm's soldiers decide to use branches cut from the trees of Birnam Wood to camouflage themselves as they approach Dunsinane castle.

### Analysis

The key figures in the fight against Macbeth appear on stage. We learn that they are at Birnam Wood. Malcolm gives the following order to his men: 'Let every soldier hew him down a bough / And bear 't before him' (V, iv, 4–5). He means that all of his men should take branches from the trees and use them to conceal themselves from Macbeth. In this way, Macbeth's spies will have no idea how many of them are there and ready to attack him.

#### Active Learning

1. Find a quotation to suggest that Malcolm's soldiers are confident of success.
2. What does Malcolm mean when he says (of Macbeth) 'And he will serve with him but constrained / Whose hearts are absent too' (V, iv, 4–5)?

#### Debate Prompt

What is the significance of the branches? What does this suggest about the soldiers?

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# Act 5, Scene 5

Location: Inside the castle at Dunsinane

## Summary

Lady Macbeth commits suicide and Macbeth is told that Birnam Wood is a-

## Analysis

Macbeth instructs his men to clear the castle with flags. He says that he will meet the attacking forces at the castle, if so many of his men had died, it does not mean that the revolt of so many men might be an indicator that

They hear the sound of a woman crying and Macbeth remarks that it is not what he has experienced so many horrors: 'I have supp'd full of horrors / Direness, faint thoughts, / Cannot once start me' (V, v, 13–15). We learn that the cry was Lady Macbeth's suicide.

## Characterisation

Lady Macbeth's death inspires Macbeth to make a long speech. He seems to have developed a very philosophical approach to life and death. It seems that he is no longer afraid or interested in the difference between life and death. Having experienced the power of having somebody's life in his hands, Macbeth seems to have concluded that life is meaningless: 'Life is but a walking shadow [...] signifying nothing' (V, v, 24–28). Macbeth might also be expressing his feeling that life without his wife is meaningless – what, after all, has all this murdering been for?

Macbeth has very little left to fight for, aside from the conviction that this battle is preordained. However, at this critical moment, he receives a message that Birnam Wood is advancing towards the castle. This is the last thing Macbeth wants to hear and it is greeted with threats and remonstrations from him, although they amount to little as there is a definite sense that Macbeth's time has come.

### Debate Prompt

1. What is the effect of Lady Macbeth's death?
2. Why do you think Macbeth makes such preparations for death?
3. Macbeth seems to be a very brave man. To what extent do you agree?

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## Act 5, Scene 6

*Location: In front of the castle at Dunsinane*

### Summary

The attacking army arrives at Dunsinane and the soldiers throw aside their

### Analysis

The attacking forces are instructed to 'throw down the branches and reveal / Your leafy screens through their shot / And show like those you are' (V, vi, 1–2). Macbeth with the help of the oncoming attack. Macbeth did not predict is decided to go forward and his son will lead the first attack and that Malcolm Macduff will follow. Trumpets are sounded to announce their attack.

This short scene brings us to the climax of the play and Macbeth's ultimate demise. Siward's words as he goes into battle provide insight into true bravery and ambition: 'Let us be beaten if we cannot fight' (V, vi, 8). Here, he comes up with an idea put forward earlier by Banquo, the idea that he will take the fate that he deserves. If he earns victory, he will take its spoils. If he does not, he will be defeated.

## Act 5, Scene 7

*Location: Somewhere on the battlefield*

### Summary

The battle is raging. Macbeth kills King Siward. Macduff vows to kill only

### Analysis

Macbeth knows that his first fight is imminent and he clings on to the witch's prophecy that a man born of a woman can hurt him. It is strange that Macbeth continues to believe in the earlier prophecy has just been exposed as a clever trick.

Young Siward enters Macbeth's room and, after a short exchange, Macbeth is killed on the stage.

Macduff enters and is clearly looking for Macbeth and only Macbeth. He is determined to kill Macbeth. Macbeth has been warned to be afraid of him. Macduff says: 'Either thou, or I, or both, shall go to heaven / With an unbattered edge / I sheathe again undeeded' (V, vii, 19–21).

He will fight Macbeth and, if he is not able to find him, he will put away his sword. He does not want to find Macbeth's men who have been forced or paid to fight for him.

Malcolm and Siward enter and give the report that the castle has already been taken. Some of Macbeth's soldiers have changed sides. The battle is almost over. They enter the castle.

#### Active Learning

Explain why Macduff is so determined to kill Macbeth.



#### Debate Prompt

Why do you think Macduff is so determined to kill Macbeth? Do you think the prophecy about 'no man born of a woman' is true?

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## Act 5, Scene 8

*In some versions of the play, Scenes 7 and 8 are together*

*Location: Somewhere on the battlefield*

### Summary

In the final scene of the play, Macduff confronts Macbeth and eventually kills him. He then goes to Malcolm and his soldiers, and declares Malcolm to be the new King of Scotland.

### Analysis

Macbeth's final lines seem to suggest that he knows that he has no hope of survival.

*Why should I play the Roman fool and die,  
On mine own sword? While I see lives, the gashes  
Do better upon them.*

He explains that he will not commit suicide because while any of his enemies are still alive, it is better used to attack them.

Macduff arrives and Macbeth admits that Macduff is the only man that he fears. Macbeth tells Macduff that there is no point fighting because Macduff will not be able to kill him, as he is invulnerable. Macduff dramatically reveals that he was not born of woman, which disproves the prophecy as his evidence. Macduff dramatically reveals that he was not born of woman, which disproves the prophecy as his evidence.

Macbeth finally realises that the witches have tricked him, and he refuses to surrender. He taunts him with thoughts of what they would do with a tyrant such as Macbeth. It seems that Macduff does not want him to surrender. Macbeth's final remarks: 'I will try to kill you now, for I am bound to do so' – he will fight to the end.

The two men fight and exit the stage fighting. They return to the stage, and Macbeth is killed.

Malcolm, Ross, Siward and various other thanes enter the stage. They discover that all had survived to see their victory. Siward is informed that his son has died, but the death is strange – he does not seem to feel sorrow but instead is comforted. Siward's son died, fighting bravely.

Macduff enters, carrying Macbeth's head; he hails Malcolm King of Scotland. He names all of his thanes as earls, noting that Scotland has never had earls before his coronation.

#### Active Learning

How was Macduff born?

#### Debate Prompts

1. Why do you think Macduff goes to kill Macbeth?
2. Do you think that Macbeth was using a cruel trick or fully responsible and he chose?

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## Characters: Who are the

**Macbeth** is the lead character in the play. He is a relative of the king and at the start of the play he holds the title Thane of Glamis, and he quickly becomes eventually king. He is an ambitious character with a strong desire to become king, exploited by the witches, who tempt him with false promises. This, along with the murder of his own best friend and killing of Duncan, provokes Macbeth into killing the king, making his own best friend and killing of Duncan. Eventually Macbeth's wrongdoing is found out and the people turn against him. The witches have tricked him into believing that he is invincible and so he attacks. However, in the final scenes Macbeth realises that he has been tricked and in the final scene of the play.

**Lady Macbeth** is Macbeth's wife. She is a strong, ambitious and feisty woman for her husband and encourages him to do whatever it takes to reach his goal. She is pretending to be a wonderful hostess, adoring subject and loyal wife, but is a heartless character. She goads Macbeth into committing Duncan's murder. Macbeth is wracked with guilt over what she has done. She descends into sleepwalking, talking in her sleep and obsessively washing her hands. In Act 5, she commits suicide.

**The Witches** are the most famous characters of the play. They are three evil creatures, who look like bearded women. They give prophecies about Macbeth and plant the seeds that will lead to his downfall. Later they summon apparitions to give Macbeth a false sense of security about his future as king. The witches are evil characters who use their power. They can control the weather but they cannot control people. They can kill people and persuade people but ultimately Macbeth's behaviour is his own fault.

**Banquo** is Macbeth's best friend. He helps Macbeth to lead Duncan's troops and is called **Fleance**, who he is very close to. Banquo is with Macbeth when they see the witches. Banquo is interested to hear what the witches have to say but unlike Macbeth, he does not believe their fate. Banquo is told that he will not be king but that his sons will provide a line of kings. Banquo and his son must be killed to ensure that they do not become kings. Banquo is killed but Fleance manages to escape.

**Macduff** is another nobleman. He becomes important later in the play when he is the only one that Macbeth should fear. Macbeth responds by sending him to his family. Fortunately, Macduff has managed to flee Scotland, although his family is killed. In the final scene Macduff avenges his family's death by killing Macbeth. He reveals that Macbeth was born by caesarean section and henceforth he was not born 'of woman', as the witches had said.

**Duncan** is the king of Scotland at the start of the play. He is well liked but is a weak character. At the start of the play he has been betrayed by the Thane of Cawdor, who is killed by Macbeth. Duncan's two sons, **Donalbain and Malcolm**, who are innocent, flee Scotland and return later to defeat Macbeth.

**Angus, Ross and Lennox** are all Scottish noblemen. They provide examples of how noblemen should behave. They also help to move the action along by serving as a link between characters or the audience.

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# Characterisation

By 'characterisation', we mean all of the different ways in which the writer creates realistic characters. In a play such as *Macbeth*, characterisation is achieved through what characters say and what they do. Skilful characterisation means that as the audience watch, they can believe in the characters and share in their joys and sorrows.

## Macbeth

Macbeth is the leading character in the play. He lives in a castle in Inverness with his wife Lady Macbeth. He is a relative of King Duncan and has the title of Thane of Glamis. At the beginning of the play, he is on his way back from leading Duncan's army in battle, with the help of his friend Banquo. On his way back from battle, he and Banquo meet three weird women, who prophesy that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and then king. Macbeth is a very ambitious character and these prophecies appeal to his ambition.

Macbeth writes to his wife about the prophecies and she becomes intent on bringing him to the throne as soon as possible. She makes a plan to help him secure the throne by killing Duncan and goads Macbeth into carrying out the plan.

In the lead-up to the murder, Macbeth hallucinates and visualises the murder sign that he should commit the murder and stab Duncan in his sleep.

After the murder, Macbeth is forced to lie to all of his closest companions. He tells them that the servants who planted the seeds of his downfall. They tell him that: 'Macbeth had murdered his sleep now Macbeth does not sleep and becomes increasingly troubled and paranoid.'

Becoming king does not make Macbeth happy because his wrongdoings now worry him. His well-meaning and moral friends, i.e. Banquo and Macduff, trouble him.

Banquo has to be eliminated because the witches said that his children would be kings. Macbeth also kills Macduff's family. Unfortunately, Banquo's son Fleance escapes. Banquo comes back to haunt Macbeth and further disrupts his sanity. Lady Macbeth cannot cope at all and she goes mad and commits suicide.

Macbeth lives on, safe in the knowledge of the witches' prophecy that 'None of woman born shall harm Macbeth'. The witches also prophesise that he will not be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill.

Eventually, the Scottish army turns against Macbeth, led by Macduff and Fleance. They besiege his castle at Dunsinane by disguising themselves with branches from the trees of Birnam Wood. In this way, Birnam Wood does come to Dunsinane Hill. The witches' other prophecy had warned Macbeth of Macduff. He had been born via caesarean and, therefore, was technically not of woman born. Macbeth was unaware of this and he is killed by Macduff.

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## Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is Macbeth's wife. She lives with him in their castle at Inverness. She is proud of her husband's success as a soldier and of his title of Thane of Glamis. However, when she learns of the witches' predictions, she becomes intent on securing the throne for Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth does not believe that Macbeth has the mental toughness to kill the king or even to try to kill him. He has killed many in battle but only because he had the backing of the law of the land. She believes that she must provide the strength to get the job done.

As luck or coincidence would have it, Duncan visits her castle the day that Lady Macbeth decides to kill him. She makes him very welcome and is the perfect hostess. He is so grateful for all of her little attentions that he gives her a beautiful present – a massive diamond. This does not affect Lady Macbeth's feelings or her plan to be done. She knows that her husband would make a good king and so she goes the way.

Lady Macbeth believes that it is her duty as his wife to support Macbeth in order to fulfil his potential. She goads him into killing Duncan and does everything that he has the strength to do what he has to do. She matches the plan and even holds a dagger over the sleeping Duncan but cannot go through with it much like her father when he tried to kill King Duncan.

After killing Duncan, Lady Macbeth is wracked with guilt and cannot concentrate. Macbeth takes control by cleaning him up and planting the daggers on the guards.

Lady Macbeth eventually gets her way and she and her husband are crowned. They plan a big banquet at their castle at Dunsinane and invite all of the important people with them. When Macbeth realises that Banquo has not arrived, he begins to sit on the empty stool which had been reserved for Banquo and Lady Macbeth tells him what has happened to Banquo. He becomes so confused that Lady Macbeth tells him to leave. Lady Macbeth does not learn of Banquo's death until sometime later.

Lady Macbeth's early strength is slowly worn down by the guilt of her part in the murder and, while she can keep her mind in the day, her mind is filled with the horror of what she has done. She sees blood on her hands and washes them to remove the stain of Duncan's blood. She has nightmares and is unable to sleep. She tries to help her but it does no good. Her sickness is locked up in her mind, alone. She cannot live with the guilt any longer and decides to end her life.

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## Banquo

Banquo is a general in King Duncan's army and a close friend of Macbeth. They fight together to defeat a rebel army and their success delights King Duncan. On their way back from this campaign, Banquo and Macbeth meet three strange women who want to talk to them. These women tell Macbeth that he will become Thane of Cawdor and then king. Banquo challenges them by asking for a prophecy for his sons. They answer in riddles, telling him that he will be:

*Lesser than Macbeth and greater,  
Not so happy yet much happier,  
Thou shalt have kings, though thou be none.*

Banquo is not amazed by the witches in the same way that Macbeth is. He does not dwell on their prophecies. However, when Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor, Banquo thinks about the thoughts of the witches. Banquo broods over the riddles and finds it hard to sleep. It becomes dark and he prays for them to stop.

Banquo has a son called Fleance, who he is very close to. They are at the coronation of Macbeth after the murder. Eventually, Macbeth becomes king and invites Fleance and Banquo to a banquet. On their way to the banquet, they are ambushed by three men. Banquo runs away and shouts at Fleance to run for his life. Banquo is killed but Fleance manages to escape.

Banquo appears at the banquet as a ghost but only Macbeth can see him. Macbeth's mind shows him the errors of his murderous ways. Banquo also appears to Macbeth by the three witches to show Macbeth the evil things that come from his actions. Banquo tells Macbeth that he should never have meddled with the evil spirits and that he should have been able to control them. Early in the play, Banquo makes a remark that accurately describes the witches in the scenes that follow.

*The instruments of darkness tell us truths  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray 's  
In deepest consequence.*

His perceptiveness and level-headedness allow him to avoid falling foul of the witches.

## Fleance

Fleance is Banquo's son and is very close to his father. He becomes a threat to Macbeth when the witches predict that Banquo will never be king but that his offspring will produce a line of kings. When Macbeth plots to kill Banquo, he orders the murderers to kill Fleance too. In the heat of the moment, Fleance manages to escape. When Macbeth is informed, he is worried about how Fleance will get revenge but knows that it will take time for Fleance to build himself up to an attack: 'the worm that feeds / Hath nature that in time will venom breed, / No teeth for the present' (III, iv, 28–30). He means that there is no need to worry about Fleance for now.

As predicted, Fleance flees the country. His whereabouts are unknown at the end of the play and the audience are left to wonder whether he does go on to become king of Scotland.

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## King Duncan

Duncan is the king of Scotland. His army have been defending Scotland against rebel forces and the attacks of the Norwegian king. They are led by Banquo and Macbeth, who also happens to be Duncan's cousin. Duncan hears how hard Macbeth and Banquo fought against the rebels and is eager to reward them. When he learns that the Thane of Cawdor has betrayed him in battle, he decides to confer his title and lands to Macbeth.

Duncan is not the best in terms of character. He has wrongly trusted the Thane of Cawdor and his servant and, despite his treachery, is no more careful when choosing his replacement. Duncan's poor judgment results in his death.

Duncan has two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain. They accompany him to Macbeth's castle to celebrate Macbeth's success and new title. Duncan likes some noblemen, to celebrate Macbeth's success and new title. Duncan likes compliments the clean air and pleasant scenery. He is won over by Lady Macbeth pleased with her that he gives her a diamond as a gift. After the day's entertainment, he goes to his bed, guarded by his grooms. He is killed in his sleep by Macbeth.

## Macduff

Macduff is a Scottish nobleman with the title Thane of Fife. He had a difficult birth by caesarean section.

Macduff accompanies Duncan to Macbeth's castle. He leaves Duncan at the castle to attend to his business. When he returns in the morning with Lennox, another nobleman, it takes a long time to gain access to the castle. It seems that the porter is suffering from drink. Macduff asks to see the king but is told that he is still sleeping. The king has died early and so Macduff goes to his chamber, where he finds Duncan murdered. The king's servants lay sleeping and one of them is holding a dagger.

Macduff raises the alarm and Macbeth quickly arrives on the scene. Macbeth kills the king's servants, before discovering that Duncan's sons have run away. With Duncan's choice but to make Macbeth king. Macduff is unable to attend the coronation because he wants to return to his wife and children in Fife.

Back in Fife, Macduff learns of Banquo's murder and the suspected culprit. He decides to leave his family and to go to England to join Malcolm's campaign against the murderous Macbeth. While in England, he hears that his wife and babies have been murdered too. This strengthens his resolve to bring Macbeth to justice.

At Birnam Wood, Macduff and Malcolm join forces with others who hate Macbeth. They march on Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane Hill, disguising their soldiers with branches and leaves. From a distance, they look like a walking forest. When they arrive at the palace, Macbeth is terrified and raving that no man born of woman can harm him. He has no idea how Macduff was born. Macduff kills him and presents his head to Malcolm and the soldiers.

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## Lady Macduff

Lady Macduff is the wife of Macduff, the Thane of Fife. She lives with him and their children in a castle in Fife. Macduff is always away on the king's business, so Lady Macduff is often left at home alone with the children.

Her husband is the one to discover Duncan's body. He is also the first person to suspect that Macbeth may have had something to do with the murder. Her husband returns to Fife after Duncan's funeral but does not stay long. He has to join the crown in England to raise an army against Macbeth. Lady Macduff is upset by her husband's decision. She feels that he is leaving care of her or their children. If Scotland is such a dangerous place, surely they need him there to protect them. Ross, another nobleman, tries to reassure Lady Macduff that everything will be okay but she is unconvinced.

Lady Macduff sits alone with her son, who does his best to raise her spirits. Macduff has been branded a traitor by Macbeth and is to be executed. She worries what this will mean for her and her children. Suddenly, an uncle tells her to run for her life, taking the boy with her. Lady Macduff chooses to do nothing wrong, and shortly afterwards her son is killed in front of her. She dies just moments later.

## The Witches

The three witches are united in their evil. They are devoted to Hecate, the goddess of all evil. Their mission is to lure people away from goodness and temptation. They enjoy making mischief and controlling people's lives. The witches have the power to control the elements: earth, air, fire and water. They speak in a way that tricks people into misunderstanding them.

People believe that the witches can control the elements: earth, air, fire and water, cause storms to capsize and sailors to perish. They can also cause earthquakes.

The witches meet on the blasted heath, where they can make their spells more powerful. They speak in rhyme and often repeat themselves; this enhances their supernatural powers.

The three witches target Macbeth, perhaps because they knew of his weak, deep-rooted ambition. True to form, he falls victim to their temptations. With their prophecies, they do not tell him how to achieve these things.

When Macbeth becomes king, he goes to visit the witches in their coven. He is told 'something wicked' rather than his name because he is no longer any less than a king. The first spirit talks to Macbeth. One is an armoured head that advises him to beware of Fife. The next is a child covered in blood. It tells Macbeth that no man can harm him. This purposely leads Macbeth to believe that he is invincible. Finally, the third spirit visualises a child with a crown on his head. The child is holding a tree and tells Macbeth to be beaten until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. Again, this makes Macbeth feel invincible.

## Hecate

Hecate is the goddess of the witches. She appears in the third act of the play, but not involving her in their dealings with Macbeth. She reappears in Act 4, when she tells the witches the spell that they have brewed and leads them in a bizarre song and dance.

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## Malcolm

Malcolm is the eldest son of King Duncan of Scotland. He has a younger brother. At the beginning of the play, Malcolm is given the title Prince of Scotland. He is the heir to the throne.

Malcolm goes with Duncan to Macbeth's castle to honour the new appointment. After Duncan is killed, Malcolm and his brother do not know what to do. The guards appeal to them for help, but Macbeth kills them before they can be questioned. Malcolm and Donalbain are in danger. They do not know who to trust. They feel that anybody around them could be a traitor. Malcolm says: 'I have daggers in men's smiles' (II, iii, 142). This means that one of their Scottish friends is to blame for their father's death.

Malcolm and Donalbain decide that their best course of action is to get out of Scotland. They do not tell anybody where they are going or why and do not mention their father's murder. Malcolm goes to England, while Donalbain goes to Ireland.

Their departure leaves Macbeth as the next in line for the throne. He becomes king and begins a brutal reign of terror. After some time, the thanes of Scotland seek help to defeat Macbeth. Malcolm is still unsure of who to trust and so does not join them all. He pretends to be as immoral as Macbeth himself. Macduff is so shocked that he says: 'O my breast! Thy hope ends here' (IV, iii, 113–114). If he cannot trust Malcolm, he cannot succeed. Eventually, Malcolm and Macduff agree to trust each other and fight Macbeth. Malcolm is general in Malcolm's army.

Shortly after Macduff's arrival in England, Ross arrives with the horrible news that Macbeth has attacked the castle in Fife. Macduff's family and servants have all been killed. Macbeth swears to avenge these deaths and Malcolm is happy to hear this.

After beating Macbeth, Malcolm becomes king of Scotland. He invites all of Scotland's exiles to return and shows his gratitude to the loyal thanes by promoting them all to the rank of earl.

## Donalbain

Donalbain is King Duncan's son, the younger brother of Malcolm. He flees to Ireland after Duncan's death and is temporarily thought to be responsible for the murder. He does not return to Scotland to help his older brother defeat Macbeth.

## Ross

Ross is related to Macduff and is an old Scottish nobleman. He is not heard of before the play but acts as a messenger. Firstly, he brings the news of Macbeth's coronation. Then, he brings news about the death of Macduff's family. It is also Ross who warns Lady Macduff to her and her children. Ross seems to be a noble and honourable man. He is loyal to his king and his country. He is also a good friend to Lady Macduff. After informing her of the dangers, he is called upon to tell Macduff about the fate of his family. Ross struggles to do this. He says: 'I were well at peace' (IV, iii, 179) when he left them, which would lead Macduff to believe that they were safe. In the space of a few lines, he goes on to tell Macduff that they have all been killed (IV, iii, 205). It is interesting to consider why Ross does this and what effect it has on Macduff.

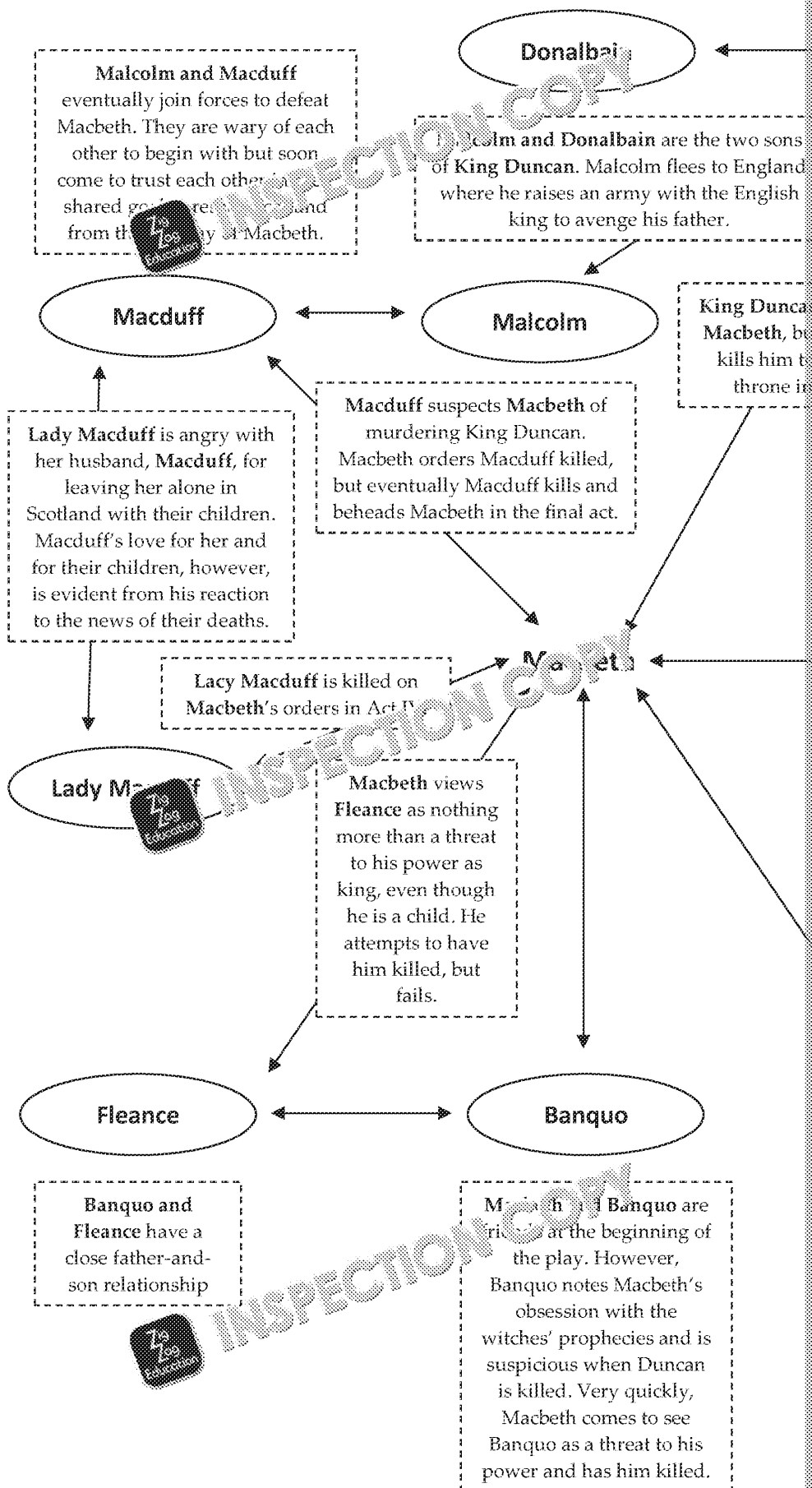


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## Relationships



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## Settings and Props

There is not much detail in *Macbeth* about settings and props, which is what allows it to adapt to different eras in history. Most of the action takes place in castles and on the battlefield, power wielded by the main characters in the story. The vast majority of the scenes are set in the Scottish countryside, in stormy weather. The dark, wet and stormy atmosphere that runs through everything in the form of the witches and Macbeth's terrible

### The witches

Shakespeare's stage directions tell us that there is 'thunder and lightning' as the play opens with the three witches on the stage. This sets the tone for the rest of the play. In Scene 3, the stage directions say, 'The heath: thunder' as the witches appear again. The wild and stormy weather that accompanies the witches reflects the unnatural and wild appetites for evil that the witches possess. It is important to remember that many people in Shakespeare's audience would have believed in witches and been afraid of them. The opening scenes, with a darkened stage, the sound of thunder and the appearance of three hags dressed in rags would have been genuinely sinister and frightening.

The scenes involving the witches use many props, which help to emphasise their nightmarish qualities. In Act 4, Scene 1, when the witches meet Macbeth, the stage directions specify that a cauldron is on the stage. This is an important and powerful and memorable scene, as the witches dance around it and toss their spells into it. A director can really bring to life the otherworldly, gruesome nature of the witches in this scene by using props to represent these items: 'Eye of newt'

Props can be used to great effect later in this scene, when the witches show Macbeth his apparitions. The first apparition is an 'armed head', the second 'a bloody child crowned with a tree in his hand'. Skillful and creative use of props here shows the strangeness of these sights and their mystical and prophetic nature.

### Daggers

Daggers play a very important role in *Macbeth*, acting as symbols for evil and as instruments of murder. In Act 2, Scene 1, just before Macbeth murders King Duncan, he sees a dagger floating in the air before him, and says,

*'Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand?'*

Macbeth wonders whether the dagger is real or just a figment of his imagination. He points out that the dagger looks just like the one he intended to use and is pointing the way to King Duncan. As he watches it, he sees splashes of blood develop on its blade. This dagger is vitally important in the development of the plot – it's almost as though Macbeth finally decides to commit murder because the dagger 'tells him to'. It has an air of magic and mystery about it just like the props in the witches' scenes. The scene can be played with an actual dagger suspended from the ceiling so that we see what Macbeth sees, or Macbeth can be talking to thin air, as though the dagger is just in his imagination.

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In the following scene, Macbeth murders King Duncan using the two dagger guards. Instead of leaving the daggers by Duncan's body, he brings them back and reproaches him,

*'Why did you bring these daggers from the place?  
They must lie there. Go carry them and smear  
The sleepy grooms with blood'*

Macbeth is unable to face the scene of his crime again and so Lady Macbeth wipes blood from them on the guards so that they will be blamed for the horror in Macbeth's mind. He has used them to stab Duncan and he is unable to face them. For Macbeth, the daggers are simply the means by which the blame is shifted onto the guards. The way that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth view the daggers tells us much about their states of mind at this point in the play.

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# Themes

The theme of a play is what the play is really all about, once we dig below the surface. Certain topics will be explored in a play – they will crop up again and again. The events of the play might make the audience consider these topics in a new way, which are the themes of the play.

## Ambition

One of the overriding themes of *Macbeth* is ambition and the dangers of unchecked ambition. It has been suggested that the play was written to educate the audience of these dangers, as it causes the downfall of the lead characters of the play and is regarded as a warning.

Shakespeare does not suggest that all ambition is bad, as Banquo is clearly a good man. He hears the witches' prophecies. However, Banquo will only pursue his ambition if it is for what is good and right. When Macbeth suggests that Banquo should step aside, Banquo benefits when Macbeth is crowned king, Banquo says:

*So I lose none  
In seeking to augment it, but still keep  
My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,  
I shall be counselled.*

Here, Banquo makes clear that he is not willing to do anything underhand to gain the throne. He will only do what he can do while keeping a clear conscience. This is a key difference between the two characters and the reason why Banquo would perhaps be a better contender for the throne.

Macbeth's downfall is due to the fact that their ambition to achieve the throne drives them by all means necessary. The problem is that once they have decided to overrule their morals, there's no turning back. For Duncan's murder, they must continue to kill other threats to his kingship. Macbeth, himself, notes that it is easier to continue things that trying to be good again would be as hard as carrying on being bad.

*... I am in blood  
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.*

He seems to suggest that there is no difference between committing one murder or another. However, there will always be threats to a king's stability and security, so he must deal with all of these threats just in case.

Macbeth becomes a tragic hero because he knows that killing Duncan is the wrong thing to do. He battles with his conscience about it. At the start of the play, he seems to have morals and a conscience. Lady Macbeth notes this, worrying that he is 'without the blow' (I, v, 18–19). Unfortunately, Macbeth's ambition is telling him and sets out to kill Duncan. He admits this to himself:

*I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself,  
And falls on th'other...*

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The final lines of this quotation show that Macbeth is aware of the danger ambition makes people get ahead of themselves and causes them to trip.

This comment on ambition is also taken up by Ross in Act 3, Scene 4: 'Thrive up / Thine own life's means!' (II, iv, 28–29). At this stage in the play, he is believed that Malcolm and Donalbain are responsible for Duncan's death who are demonised for their actions, which are 'ignominious'. However, it is a little different if the true culprit were known.

Macduff is another stark contrast to Macbeth because, like Banquo, he has ambition is for the better good of his family and his country. In the final scene of Macbeth, when he is not want to take his title, he does not want any reward for his family's deaths and create a brighter future for Scotland:

*Either thou, Macbeth,  
Or else my sword, with an unbatter'd edge,  
I sheathe again undeeded.*

However, even Macduff shows the audience the dangers of ambition. Had he not been with his wife and children, ignoring his ambition to defend and protect Scotland, he could have done a better job of defending his family.

This important theme is still relevant to us today. In today's society there are many people with a genuine ambition to become king, but nonetheless we all face dilemmas similar to those in everyday lives. Should we work hard and hope to earn promotions and rewards, or should we cut corners to achieve our goals? Is it worth cheating on a test or is it better to just pass? Should we work as a team alongside our friends, or should individual success be the goal? The themes that Shakespeare's Macbeth discusses are themes that will always play a part in our lives. For these reasons, it is easy to see why modern-day audiences to connect with Shakespeare's Macbeth.

### Debate Prompt

*Do you think that Macbeth was justified in being ambitious?*

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## The Supernatural

At the time that *Macbeth* was written and first performed, most members believed in the supernatural and they would have been very afraid of it. In belief in witchcraft and it was legitimised by the rulers of the day, who were accused of witchcraft. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare exploits those fears to captivate his audience.

He opens the play with the three witches and sets the scene of darkness, of events that will be present throughout. It is important to remember that in the play, can read the character list and the findings that tell us that these characters would have no idea what was going on. The witches speak in a way that it was believed in at the time: 'Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble' (10–11). This would have sounded very sinister to Shakespeare's contemporary audience, but this is not necessarily the case for the modern-day audience, but this is not necessarily the case for the audience.

Supernatural events are fundamental to the plot of *Macbeth*. The action of the play would not have happened without the witches' supernatural meddling at the start. In addition, the reappearance and their apparitions are necessary to move the play along. The main supernatural occurrences in the play: the witches' first appearance, the appearance of Banquo's ghost and the witches' second appearance, accompanied by the apparitions.

In addition, *Macbeth* features various unnatural events that could be attributed to the supernatural. It is up to the audience to decide who or what is to blame. This is particularly evident in the weather conditions that are a feature of the play. Early in the play we learn that the weather is stormy, so it is no surprise that the audience might blame them for the events of the key events of the play. In addition, the characters make reference to the supernatural. Macbeth requests that his 'unsex' (I, v, 40) her so that she is able to kill Duncan. It is certainly not natural. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking should also be considered as supernatural. At the time that Shakespeare was writing, the audience would have been terrified to see a woman walk across the stage as if she were awake, knowing that she was actually asleep.

We only have to think about the popularity of modern-day horror films to see that the supernatural is something that has remained constant throughout the centuries. In some more modern interpretations the witches have been portrayed as hags rather than supernatural characters. This is interesting because it shows that what Shakespeare is exploring is fear of the unknown, rather than the supernatural. It is shown that while hysteria about witchcraft was common in Shakespeare's time, there were also women who had chosen to adopt alternative lifestyles or beliefs: these included older widows who did not socialise with their neighbours; those who used unexplained medical remedies, particularly midwives; those who held unacceptably religious, social or political beliefs. If we take into consideration examples of perceived threats to the good of society, it is easy to draw conclusions about the audience members who might have blamed the witches for Macbeth's downfall, but they didn't actually do very much, did they?

### Active Learning

If you were directing this play, how would you present the key events? Provide examples of scenes with text references.

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## Gender and Aggression

Issues of gender and gender roles are brought up time and time again in *Macbeth*. In general belief that masculinity should be associated with aggression and violence, women should be devoid of this. In part, the play reflects the accepted gender roles of the time. Shakespeare's female characters seem to go far beyond what was considered acceptable for women.

Far from the early seventeenth century ideals of beautiful, dignified and obedient women, the witches encompass all that is evil in the play. On meeting them, Banquo is struck by their appearance: 'You should be women, / And yet your beard forbids me to interpose' (I, iii, 45–47). The witches look like women but they have beards and so Banquo is confused. The witches are among the most evil and aggressive characters in the play. It is of their way to cause death and destruction. It is interesting that Shakespeare gives the witches unfeminine behaviour with an unfeminine appearance. This is often added to the play, when the witches often appear naked or in a state of undress. This contrasts with the ideals of prim and chaste ladies.

Lady Macbeth also begins the play in a wholly unfeminine role. The extent of her ambition is bettered only by the supernatural witches. On hearing of the witches' prophecy, she is not concerned for her husband or his wishes. Instead, she immediately makes a decision determined that her husband should follow it:

*Hie thee hither,  
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear  
And chastise with the valor of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round,  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crowned withal*

She wants to get her husband home so that she can persuade him to actively participate in the murder. When she learns that Duncan will accompany him to the castle, she immediately decides that he must be killed, referring to his 'fatal entrance' (I, v, 38) to her castle. Her independence and desire to change the ideas of her husband would not have been palatable to the audience. Her cold-heartedness and aggression would have been even less so.

Lady Macbeth seems to be aware that her thoughts and behaviour are not feminine. She asks spirits to 'unsex' (I, v, 40) her so that she can be consistently cruel and ruthless. She refers to childbirth and asks her mother's milk to be turned poisonous, thus rejecting her maternal role. She comes back to this in Act 1, Scene 7, when she suggests that she 'pour[ed] the brains out' of her own child, if she had promised Macbeth that she would do so. This is a horrendously unfeminine thing to even talk about hypothetically. It would have shocked and horrified the audience.

Lady Macbeth appears to believe in traditional gender roles when it suits her. She uses masculinity to goad Macbeth into killing Duncan: 'When you durst do it, then you were a man; / She says that Macbeth was a man when he decided to kill Duncan but he was not a man when he decided not to. This is a role adopted by Macbeth, who challenges the murderers to be men, but they are not manly.

Macbeth is aware that Lady Macbeth's behaviour is most unfeminine. He refers to the fact that he has no female babies: 'Bring forth men-children only' (I, vii, 73). The implication is that he would not want to have daughters with Lady Macbeth's character traits.

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Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's relationship is the opposite of what was socially acceptable in the seventeenth century. She is controlling him and he obeys her. By the end of the play, they have reverted back to what is socially acceptable. Macbeth is strong (albeit flawed) whereas Lady Macbeth is feeble, weak and unable to cope. She does not play a part in his decisions and he shows very little care for her or what she thinks. It is also important to remember that in Shakespeare's time women were not on stage. This meant that all of the female roles were played by men. This may explain Shakespeare's preoccupation with gender roles - he wanted to make sure that the characters which were meant to be women!

The theme of gender and aggression is another interesting one that is very relevant to the appropriate roles for men and women is universal in every society or the place. In Shakespeare's day Lady Macbeth was considered unfeminine due to her ambition and her desire to tell her husband what to do. Do you think that is still the case in modern British society? Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff are compared as examples of femininity. By comparing how these characters are portrayed at different times, we can gain useful insight into the desired role of women at that time.



*Lady Macbeth* by George Cattermole

#### Debate Prompt

Compare Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to the relationship between Macduff and Lady Macduff. How do these relationships compare with seventeenth-century expectations of gender roles?

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## Appearance and Reality

The theme of the differences between appearance and reality is present through the very first scene: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air'. This paradoxical language here suggests that things are not always what they seem. Fair be foul? Equally, if something is foul, how can it be fair? In addition, these filthy air bring in the idea of bad visibility and they will resonate throughout the play. This occurs under the cover of darkness and there are frequent references to storms.

In Act 1, Scene 3, Macbeth mirrors this speech by the witches: 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' (I, iii, 38). This is confusing for the audience. Is this Macbeth speaking or are the witches controlling him in some way? Whatever the reason, things do not appear to be what they are. The obvious level of the characters make reference to the fact that appearances can be deceiving.

*There's no more to be said  
To find the mind's construction in the face:  
He was a gentleman on whom I built  
An absolute trust.*

Here, Duncan remarks that it is hard to judge a book by its cover, as he had always trusted Macbeth. However, the events that follow do more to suggest that Duncan is a very gullible man.

In addition, some of the characters deliberately use their appearances to deceive. Macbeth instructs Macduff to purposefully hide his true thoughts: 'look like th' innocent flower, but be the serpent under 't' (I, v, 64–65). This is something that Macbeth takes on board, later to his own detriment. Macbeth's feelings: 'False face must hide what the false heart does know' (I, vii, 83). The Macbeth wants his false face to trick others, or whether he needs to trick his own.

The various incidences of visions, dreams and hallucinations also contribute to the theme of appearance and reality. In his famous dagger speech, Macbeth says 'I see a dagger I see before me, which is a dagger I see before me, why he can't touch the dagger but he can see it. I clutch thee not and yet I feel it. The audience does not know who or what is responsible for conjuring this image. Is it Macbeth's mind and imagination creating the dagger? Or are the witches somehow responsible?

Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene provides interesting additional evidence for the theme of appearance and reality. She is witnessed sleepwalking and the doctor notes that it seems that she is asleep. Lady Macbeth enters the stage appearing to be awake and proceeds to have conversations, as if she were awake. Witnessing this would've been particularly disturbing when the play was written because sleepwalking was considered to be supernatural.

The whole notion of appearance and reality is important when we remind ourselves that what the audience is seeing in front of their eyes, none of the events are actually real. It is all just a story. Macbeth makes reference to the theatre in his soliloquy.

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more.*

He suggests that life is just like the theatre, nothing is real, it's just how it seems.

### Active Learning

1. Choose a character from the play and explain how he/she is rightly or wrongly judged because of his/her appearance.
2. Choose one of the themes and create a mind map of all of the times the theme is mentioned in the play. (This will make a brilliant revision note!). Where possible, use a quote to support your point.

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## Ideas and Messages

The idea or the message of a play is what the writer might have wanted watching the action unfold. There are several important messages or ideas

### **Kings are divinely appointed and it is a crime against God to challenge**

In Shakespeare's time, it was believed that kings were appointed by God. To challenge, depose or murder a king was considered to be a crime against God and nature. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents us with a man who murders a king for reasons of personal ambition – and the whole of nature rebels against his act. On the night of the murder, there is terrible stormy weather and Shakespeare speaks of horrendous and unnatural occurrences, such as 'Lamentings heard th'air, strange screams of death' and he notes that, 'the earth/Was fevered and did shake'. The action of the rest of the play brings Macbeth to the edge of madness and eventually to his death. The message is clear: you cannot murder a king without being terribly punished.

### **Excessive ambition that is not tempered by a moral sense will lead to destruction**

Macbeth's fatal flaw is his ambition. He wants to be king so badly that as soon as the idea is in his mind, he begins to plot murder. His ambition blinds him to all consequences and prevents him from seeing the consequences of his actions. As a result, he enters a spiral of violence and tyranny – which, ironically, does not even make him king. The message is clear: excessive ambition is a dangerous flaw. The admirable men in his play are those who fight for the good of their country rather than their own power.

### **A natural sense of order and justice will always prevail in the end**

Although Macbeth becomes king and rules over Scotland like a tyrant for a while, his power is short-lived because it is undeserved. Shakespeare shows us that there is no escaping the 'right' and the correct way for things to be done. The murder of Duncan upsets everything temporarily but order is restored at the end of the play as Malcolm claims the Scottish crown and Macbeth is killed.

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## The Writer's Use of Language

Shakespeare uses vague, confusing and sometimes paradoxical language to create uncertainty in *Macbeth*. 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' (I, i, 11) is a particularly good example. Shakespeare's use of contradictory language to show the supernatural element of the witches talk in riddles, Shakespeare informs his audience that they are not to understand this confusing language allows the tragic events of the play to take place. If the witches were using clear and certain language, perhaps he would never have fallen foul. The first apparition tells Macbeth that he will not be defeated 'until/ Great Birnam Wood / Shall come against him' (IV, i, 106–108), it is likely that the audience (like the witches) could see the obvious way of telling him that it will never happen. They will interpret the intended meaning.

Throughout the play, the language used is often dark, sinister and even quite violent. As one of Shakespeare's most violent plays, it is also one of the goriest. While Macbeth is offstage, Shakespeare does not shy away from describing the grisly outcome: 'unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps' (I, ii, 22).

Shakespeare also uses language to create images of sickness and disease. Macbeth calls upon the doctor to cure Lady Macbeth of hers: 'find her disease and pristine health' (V, iii, 50–51). In addition, sickness and disease is used to describe corruption. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are a corrupting force. Their actions corrupt Scotland and consequently Scotland is referred to as if it were suffering from disease. In Act 4, Scene 3 Malcolm says:

*I think our country sinks beneath the yoke;  
It weeps, it bleeds; and each new day  
Is added to her wounds.*

In addition, blood is used as a recurring symbol of guilt. As soon as Duncan is murdered, Lady Macbeth suggests they should wash the blood away. In Act II, Scene ii Macbeth wonders if the ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?' (II, ii, 59–60) and he goes on to say it is impossible to clean the blood away. In her final scenes, Lady Macbeth asks 'ne'er be clean?' (V, i, 41) and concludes that no amount of perfume will be able to wash away the blood. Shortly after these comments, Lady Macbeth commits suicide.

Repetition is another device used by Shakespeare to convey his ideas to his audience. As mentioned, the image of blood on one's hands is picked up continually throughout the play. There is regular reference to sleep and the effects of sleep: 'Glamis hath murdered sleep / And so has Cawdor / Shall sleep no more – Macbeth shall sleep no more!' (II, ii, 41–42). This is one of the references to sleep, which are particularly frequent in Act II, Scene ii.

### Tone

*Macbeth* is thought to be one of Shakespeare's darkest tragedies. The play is dark, sinister and wicked. Most of the play is performed under the cover of dark night. The directions for the weather, it is almost certainly bad weather. The sky is dark and the wind is howling. It sets the tone for the action of the play.

Even the brief, vaguely funny bits of the play are not without a dark and sinister undertone. The porter's funny speech when he is opening the door is full of dramatic irony. He pretends to be a gatekeeper to hell and he isn't far wrong. Macbeth's castle is quite hellish at times.

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## Style

Most of the characters in Macbeth speak in **iambic pentameter** or **blank verse**, which gives a poetic quality to their speech. As in all of Shakespeare's plays, this is a sign of the nobility. The word iambic refers to the fact that the rhythm is made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. For example Mac-BETH. Pentameter refers to the fact that there are five instances of this in each line. It should create a 'Da-DUM, Da-DUM, Da-DUM, Da-DUM, Da-DUM' rhythm.

The characters of lower status do not speak in this way. Their speech is in prose, which is in stark contrast. The porter speaks in this way, as do the doctor and gentlemen. Prose is a form of ordinary language. Characters who speak in prose, speak the way we do.

The witches have their own completely separate type of speech. It is called **trochaic tetrameter** and basically means that they speak in a sing-song rhyme. Trochaic means that there are two trochees. Trochees create rhythm with a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. Tetrameter means that there are four of these trochees; for example, DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da.

They also use **rhyming couplets**, which means that the lines are grouped in pairs that rhyme. These pairs of lines rhyme:

*When shall we three meet again  
In thunder, lightning or in rain?*

It has been suggested that this is how seventeenth-century audiences believed the witches sounded. It sounds odd and perhaps a little sinister to us, it wouldn't sound terrifying to them.

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## Form

The form of a text is the type of text it is: for example, a novel, a poem or a play. It has certain features and conventions – for example, many novels are divided into chapters and are written in the first or third person.

Macbeth is a play. To be more specific, it is a tragedy. A tragedy is a play in which the main character has a flaw in their personality that eventually leads to their downfall – a tragic flaw. As a play, it has a particular form, and it often ends with their death. As a play, a particular element of tragic drama that it is important to understand.

### Tragic flaw

Macbeth's tragic flaw is his ambition: an ambition that knows no bounds and disregards moral conventions. He is so desperate to be king that as soon as the witches give him their prophecy, he starts to consider murder. Most people would not do this, but Macbeth, with no regard for the consequences, Macbeth and his wife turn their murders into a game. Macbeth then appears to lose all grip on reality and moral sense and his actions become cold and barbaric still: first the murder of his friend, Banquo, and then the slaughter of Macduff and her children. As with all tragedies, Macbeth's flaw leads to his downfall. His army rises up against him and he is killed by Macduff, seeking revenge for the murder of his family.

### Dramatic irony

Dramatic irony occurs in a play when the audience becomes aware of a situation that the characters in the play do not. It is frequently used in tragic drama. There are several instances of dramatic irony in Macbeth. We learn in Act 1, Scene 5, that Lady Macbeth intends to murder King Duncan, but Duncan is unaware of this.

*Come, thick night,  
And peerless frown the dimmest smoke of hell,  
That my poor knife see not the wound it makes*

In the following scene, King Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle and is greeted by Lady Macbeth. The audience knows that Lady Macbeth plans to murder King Duncan but King Duncan is unaware of this. Lady Macbeth's welcome sounds false and hollow to the audience. We feel deeper sympathy for King Duncan as we consider the fate that awaits him.

### Stage directions and props

When studying a play, it is important to remember that it was written to be performed, not just to be read. Stage directions are the playwright's way of telling the actors how to perform certain sections of the play to have the desired effect on the audience (see page 43). For example, Shakespeare has included stage directions to stage thunder every time the witches appear on stage. This is important – the storm, the darkness and the evil of the witches create a frightening and foreboding atmosphere. Shakespeare's day, this would have been very unsettling for the audience. Stage directions also tell us how characters feel – we must analyse the main characters and use stage directions to gain more insight.

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## Structure

**Structure** refers to the manner in which the action of the play has been organised so that it holds the attention of the audience and can easily be followed and understood.

The play is divided into five acts, each of which is split into various scenes. The play follows a linear structure, playing chronologically, without showing flashbacks or simultaneous scenes. The only slight interruptions to the action are the dreams and hallucinations of Macbeth. Some of the most important events in the play happen 'off stage' and the audience does not see them happen: for example, the murder of King Duncan and Lady Macduff.

The play begins and ends with a civil war, which gives the impression that the cycle of violence is never-ending. It is also ironic that Macbeth begins the play fighting against rebellious thanes, only to end the play fighting against him.

It follows the standard structure of a Shakespearean tragedy:

- In Act 1, the circumstances are set and we are made aware of the setting. The key conflicts and the flaw that will lead to our hero's downfall are all introduced.
- In Act 2, the intensifying action develops, as the conflict grows and the stakes are raised. The inevitability of Macbeth's eventual downfall becomes clear, but he is still powerful and actively doing bad things, including murdering King Duncan.
- In Act 3, Macbeth reaches a crisis point, from which he cannot return. He is now isolated and surrounded by enemies. He is murdered. There is a reversal in his fortunes. His power declines while his enemies rise up to oppose him and plan to get rid of him. His feelings of guilt weigh heavily on him.
- In Act 4, we see the beginnings of a resolution. An opposing force begins to emerge. Macbeth is now completely isolated after the betrayal and murder of Lady Macduff and the madness of Lady Macbeth.
- In Act 5, we have the final disclosure as all the loose ends are tied up. The final battle takes place and Macbeth is defeated. There is some recognition that the cycle of violence cannot be broken, and therefore we cannot wholly celebrate his death. The rightful heir, Malcolm, is restored to the throne.

Shakespeare structures the play in such a way as to create unbearable tension, which he then diffuses with temporary breaks from the action. For example, the tension builds as we move closer to the murder of Duncan but the tension is broken by the Porter's comic interlude.

In Act 5, as the action escalates towards the climax and the final defeat of Macbeth, the pace is very short, switching between the invading armies and Macbeth, who prepares for the final battle. This gives the impression of events moving very quickly, all headed towards an inevitable conclusion.

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## Who was William Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. The exact date is unknown but it is traditionally celebrated on St George's Day, 23<sup>rd</sup> April. He was one of the eight children of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. Shakespeare's family was not wealthy but his father was well known in the town. It is believed that the young Shakespeare was educated at the Kings New School in Stratford but he left school at a young age to find employment.

Aged just eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway in a hurried ceremony in Stratford-upon-Avon. Six months later Anne gave birth to the couple's first child, a daughter that they called Susanna. Two years later, the family was completed with the birth of twins, Hamnet and Judith.

In 1588, Shakespeare moved to London and quickly found work at the Swan writing plays and his first play, *Henry VI*, was performed in 1592. It is believed something in the region of 37 plays and 153 sonnets throughout his career. Shakespeare did not write his plays and that his name was attributed to the who, for various suggested reasons, preferred to remain anonymous. None of the evidence to back up these theories and we will probably never know for certain between Shakespeare's writing of *Richard III* and *Hamlet*.

When Shakespeare's plays were first written they did receive some criticism as many people of the day. However, they succeeded in attaining the lowest echelons of a class-ridden society, all the way up to the noblemen to do so. By studying Shakespeare's plays, we can gain insight into the lives of the people of the time.

Eventually, Shakespeare's plays proved to be so popular with London audiences that the theatre company raised the funds to build their own larger theatre called the Swan Theatre. It was very popular with the royal families and Shakespeare was the favourite of the time. Elizabeth I and James I. James I was so impressed with Shakespeare's company to be known as the King's Men.

William Shakespeare died on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1616, the day that is claimed to be the same day that he was born. He survived by his wife and daughters. His son Hamnet had died some years earlier. At the time of his death, Shakespeare had retired from writing and was in retirement funded by the success of his works. However, even he would not have known that his writing would still have such popularity and influence 400 years later! Many expressions that have found their way into everyday language can be traced back to his works. In addition, many of the first found in Shakespeare's works can be found in later works.

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## Macbeth

*Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays and is generally considered to be one of his most complicated works. It is a tragedy and details the downfall of a Scottish thane who is tempted by three witches to corrupt his character, driving him to murder and evil and his eventual downfall. It also provides insight into the dangers of excessive ambition. It also provides insight into the supernatural. It is one of Shakespeare's most well-known works and is a favourite of students.

*Macbeth* is believed to have been written in 1606 during the reign of James VI of Scotland. The Scottish setting of the play, as James I was also James VI of Scotland. In addition, Banquo are historical figures in Scottish history and various aspects of the play have been taken from even Scottish history. It is the only one of Shakespeare's plays set in Scotland. The fact that it was such a short play is believed to have been due to the fact that James I did not enjoy long plays and so Shakespeare had to write a shorter play.

James I was a strong believer in the divine right of kings, a theory that was popular in the 16th century, which suggested that a king's right to his title was bestowed upon him by God. An attack or threat to the king constituted an attack on God's will. Similar ideas are explored in *Macbeth*. Macbeth's intention to disrupt the natural progression of his life leads to his downfall.

The supernatural and sinister side of *Macbeth* is one of the main reasons for its popularity. It was believed that this aspect of the play was included to please King James VI. The play features the famous three witches and the goddess of witchcraft, Hecate. Audiences of the play witness various supernatural acts including spells cast and also the appearance of ghosts. It is important to note that seventeenth-century beliefs in witchcraft and, therefore, the supernatural elements of the play would have been familiar to the audience at the time that the play was written. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking would have been seen as a supernatural act and the speeches and incantations of the witches would have been seen as significant that Shakespeare chose to feature witches rather than more overtly evil characters. Not inherently bad, they are evil women who have been corrupted by evil. The play explores how a previously good and noble person can become evil. As the play progresses, Macbeth becomes increasingly tied to the witches and their influence. By the end of the play, he has no free will at all. He is little better than a puppet.

The play itself is surrounded by myths and superstition and some people believe that actors and theatre companies staging productions of *Macbeth* have had bad luck and various examples of this bad luck can be provided. For example, the actor who played Lady Macbeth in the first performance of the play became mysteriously ill. A 1971 production in New York suffered two robberies and seven fires. It is said that Lincoln was reading *Macbeth* aloud to friends, shortly before his assassination.

It is thought to be unlucky for actors to refer to the play as *Macbeth* unless they are the witches and so alternative titles, including 'The Scottish Play' or 'The Bard's Play', are often used. Where these superstitions came from but if seventeenth-century superstition is no surprise that actors were fearful about the play. It has been suggested that the witches' incantations included were real spells with real magical powers. A more logical explanation has been offered for the emergence of the superstitions. In the 19th century, when the play became associated with failing or failed theatre companies. This was because in the 19th century theatre companies tried to salvage their reputation and ticket sales by performing a crowd-pleaser, *Macbeth*. Invariably, this wasn't always enough to save them and so people began to notice that *Macbeth* was often the final play performed by a company. Over time, this association grew to the popular perception that performing *Macbeth* was unlucky.

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## Further Reading

If you would like to develop your understanding of *Macbeth* a little further resources:

### Play Text

Oxford School Shakespeare: *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, edited by P. (0198324003).

*Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, OUP Oxford, March 2009, (ISBN 9780195183240)

### Suggested Books

Dickson E and Staines J (2016) *The Globe Guide to Shakespeare*, Profile Books

Wells, Stanley (2017) *Shakespeare's Tragedies: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press

### Suggested Websites

For further research about Shakespeare's plays, theatre, actors and sources:  
<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/>

For information about Shakespeare's life and his language, and to watch video of his plays:  
<https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare>

For information on the Lord Chamberlain's Men (Shakespeare's theatre company):  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lord-Chamberlains-Men>

For information on Shakespearean costumes:  
<https://teach.shakespearesglobe.com/fact-sheet-costumes-and-cosmetics>

For information on special effects in Shakespeare's Globe theatre:  
<http://www.bardstage.org/globe-theatre-special-effects.htm>

For definitions of tragedy:  
<https://www.britannica.com/art/tragedy-literature>

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# Glossary



<b>Act</b>	a section of a play – in Macbeth, there are five acts
<b>Apparition</b>	a vision or a ghost
<b>Blank verse</b>	verse written in iambic pentameter but that does not rhyme
<b>Character</b>	one of the people in the story being told
<b>Context</b>	the time and place in society that affect how people interpret a text
<b>Dramatic irony</b>	when the reader or audience is aware of a situation that the character is not aware of; this adds another layer of meaning to the character
<b>Extract</b>	a short section taken from a text
<b>Form</b>	the format of a text (novel, poem or play)
<b>Iambic pentameter</b>	a line that contains five iambs; an iamb is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable
<b>Idea</b>	what the writer might have wanted his audience to think about
<b>Plot</b>	the main events of a play or novel
<b>Prop</b>	an object or item used on the stage to add meaning to a scene
<b>Prophecy</b>	a prediction about what will happen in the future
<b>Prose</b>	the written form of ordinary language
<b>Rhyming couplet</b>	a pair of lines that rhyme
<b>Scene</b>	a section of a play; each act is divided into several scenes
<b>Setting</b>	the location of the action in a play
<b>Soliloquy</b>	a speech in which a character speaks his or her thoughts aloud
<b>Stage direction</b>	instructions that a playwright writes to help direct the play
<b>Structure</b>	how the action of the play is organised or divided to help the audience to understand it
<b>Style</b>	the way that a writer writes: choice of words and sentence structure
<b>Symbol</b>	a thing which stands for, or represents, something of great value
<b>Thane</b>	a Scottish lord
<b>Theme</b>	what the play is all about; a topic that is explored in a text
<b>Tragedy</b>	a play in which the main character has a tragic flaw or makes a bad choice, usually has a sad ending
<b>Tragic hero</b>	the hero of a tragedy
<b>Trochaic tetrameter</b>	a line with four trochees; a trochee is a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable

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# Suggested Answers

Below are some ideas for things to consider when covering the discussion questions and learning tasks with your class.

## Act 1, Scene 1

### Debate Prompts

1. Consider:
  - the dramatic opening effect of witches on stage
  - interest in Macbeth created by the witches' mention of him
  - the importance of the witches as a theme in the play
2. Consider:
  - feelings of fear and excitement
  - curiosity about what will happen next
3. Consider:
  - the metrical rhythm of the lines (trochaic tetrameter)
  - sounds like chanting or incantation
  - the witches speak in unison as though they are all of the same mind

## Act 1, Scene 2

### Debate Prompts

1. Consider:
  - contrast between Macbeth at the start and at the end of the play – we see
  - we see that he has a good side so we have a certain amount of sympathy

## Act 1, Scene 3

### Debate Prompts

1. Banquo's prophecy is of personal interest because he is told his children will be kings.
2. Dramatic irony – the audience works out that the witches are correct before Macbeth anticipates Macbeth's reaction; it builds interest.

### Active Learning

1. Answers could include: 'wither'd', 'wild', 'chappy', 'skinny'.
2. Students' own interpretations.
3. Answers could include:
  - a) 'I' the name of truth, / Are ye fantastical?'
  - b) 'The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, / And these are of them. Why 'Were such things here as we do speak about? / Or have we eaten on the reason prisoner?'
  - c) 'Two truths are told'
  - d) 'The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence.'

## Act 1, Scene 4

### Active Learning

There is already a king, so Macbeth also has heirs. His only option is to get rid of the king.

### Debate Prompts

Discuss how the witches first plant the idea in Macbeth's head but Macbeth himself takes it seriously and act on them. If he was a good man would he have listened at all?

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**Act 1, Scene 5***Debate Prompt*

She is evil, as shown by her desire to be filled with cruelty and her calling upon the murder.

- However, she is brave to do something as scary as call on evil spirits and show Macbeth to be King and is prepared to kill for this. Very determined.

**Act 1, Scene 6***Debate Prompts*

Dramatic irony – the audience knows what is going to happen and knows that Lady Macbeth is going to be involved. This means that we feel sympathy for Duncan and a sense of helplessness so we watch the action is more exciting and tense.

*Active Learning*

1. Students' own answers
2. Answers could include:  
'All our service / In every point twice done and then done double'  
'those honours deep and broad wherewith / Your majesty loads our house'

**Act 1, Scene 7***Debate Prompts*

1. Macbeth's battle with his conscience builds up tension as we don't know what he will do. This also highlights the enormity of his crime as he tells us all the reasons why he should not do it.
2. This is really personal interpretation – Macbeth does have personal ambition but it is not the only reason. It is by his wife, who has ridiculed his manhood.

*Active Learning*

1. Quotations could include:  
Macbeth: 'I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more is none.'  
Lady Macbeth: 'When you durst do it, never / You were a man; / And, to be more than you now, would / Be so much more than you are.'  
Duncan: 'So clear in his great office'.  
Macbeth: 'Duncan is my father's cousin and subject' ('double trust' ... 'strong both against me and mine own purpose').  
Macbeth's only real motivation is his 'vaulting ambition', which is not a good one.
2. Reasons could include:  
Duncan is a good man ('so clear in his great office').  
Macbeth is Duncan's cousin and subject ('double trust' ... 'strong both against me and mine own purpose').  
Macbeth's only real motivation is his 'vaulting ambition', which is not a good one.

**Act 2, Scene 1**

Essay answers might build on some of the following points:

Banquo is polite and friendly to Macbeth. But he specifically says that he has a lot to say and wants to keep his 'allegiance clear' – which suggests that he suspects Macbeth might be up to something. He brings up the subject of the witches and points out that they have 'show'd some' signs. This is a gentle attempt to get Macbeth to talk more.

**Act 2, Scene 2***Debate Prompts*

Lady Macbeth shows some anxiety before Macbeth comes back from the king's chamber. She is worried that the guards might have woken up or that Macbeth might not have seen the daggers. She does not carry out the murder herself because of Duncan's resemblance to her father. Her attitude changes when Macbeth enters the room and shows a show of confidence for his benevolent actions.

*Active Learning*

1. 1) Druggan (Lady Macbeth); 2) Kill the king with a dagger (Macbeth). The guards would smear them with blood, to try to place the blame on them (Lady Macbeth).
2. Macbeth becomes more unsettled and paranoid, thinking he has heard voices. He says that 'every noise appals me'. Lady Macbeth does not change much in this scene. She is determined, and condemns Macbeth for being so affected ('Consider it not as a fault, / Poorly in your thoughts') but she is wary that their actions could change them ('We will make us mad').

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**Act 2, Scene 3***Debate Prompts*

Consider Lady Macbeth's ability to dissemble and lie. She could pretend to faint from herself and Macbeth. However, she shows herself to be susceptible to nerves.

*Active Learning*

1. Macduff is immediately suspicious that Macbeth killed the guards: 'Wherefore / Donalbain is suspicious of everyone, even those close to him: 'There's dagger / blood, / The nearer bloody'.
2. The weather is stormy to reflect the wild and unruly events that have happened. The technique of pathetic fallacy is used here.
3. Student responses.

**Act 2, Scene 4***Debate Prompts*

1. The witches? God? Some universal sense of order that has been disrupted?
2. For emphasis; to highlight the enormity of the crime that has been committed; to emphasise the universal sense of order and justice that has been upset; to emphasise the darkness.
3. Macduff does not suspect Macbeth at this point – he is a good man and likes Macbeth. Macbeth is shrewd, however, and very moral. As Macbeth behaves more like a tyrant, he becomes more suspicious of him. It all becomes very personal with the murder of his family, when Macduff puts himself up in opposition.

*Active Learning*

It is dark when it should be light; a falcon is killed by an owl; Duncan's horses escape each other.

**Act 3, Scene 1***Debate Prompts*

1. Consider the increasing formality and stiffness of Banquo's tone. He does not relax during the day but goes on being formal.
2. Compare Lady Macbeth to earlier scenes – she is very quiet and almost meek. What is she doing? Instead tries to comfort and console him. When she enquires about the witches, he alludes to her saying he doesn't want her to know about them and she complies. Does she feel fear or guilt? She might be frustrated by Macbeth's doubts? Perhaps she is taking control of the king and in charge of events himself.

*Active Learning*

Macbeth tries to convince them that Banquo had prevented them being promoted in the past which held you / So under fortune'). He uses rhetorical questions ('Do you find / That you have predominance in your nature / That you can let this go?') as a persuasive technique. He is desperate to kill Banquo, and while previously he was so undecided about murdering Duncan, he is now ordering more people to be killed.

**Act 3, Scene 2***Debate Prompts*

Consider Macbeth's attitude and actions – how he treats Banquo and his wife. They respond to him as well.

*Active Learning*

Answers could include: Macbeth's black agents', 'crow', 'invisible hand', 'rooky wood'.

**Act 3, Scene 3***Debate Prompts*

The witches promised Banquo that he would father kings – i.e. that Fleance will be king. If he escaped, he could still potentially become king and take the crown from Macbeth.

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### Act 3, Scene 4

#### Debate Prompts

Duncan worse – he is a king, so to murder him goes against the universal laws of God. Duncan also trusted and rewarded Macbeth so it is a personal betrayal.

Banquo worse – Banquo was Macbeth's personal friend. Very personal betrayal. character and the father of a young child.

#### Active Learning

1. Students might mention: Fleance was a child, he escaped – this means that Macbeth feels guilty for murdering Banquo; He feels he is 'in too deep' ('I am too deep in sin') and thinks Macduff might be the victim of murder.
2. Student's own answers.

### Act 3, Scene 5

#### Debate Prompts

The witches seem to be following the actions of the play with interest as though Macbeth's downfall. However, Macbeth has acted independently and decided to go on from the witches at all.

#### Active Learning

Hecate is angry with the witches for telling Macbeth's future, that they shared in that she was not involved.

### Act 3, Scene 6

#### Active Learning

1. There is a shortage of meat, everyone is sleepless, and people keep being murdered.
2. Northumberland and Siward
3. Macduff, Malcolm, Lennox, Ross, perhaps the witches...

### Act 4, Scene 1

#### Active Learning

1. Any from Macbeth: 'toad of a fenny snake', 'eye of newt', 'toe of frog', 'wool of bat', 'adder's fork', 'adder's fork', 'worm's sting', 'lizard's leg', 'owlet's wing'.
2. Student's own answers
3. Student's own answers

#### Debate Prompt

Student's own answers

### Act 4, Scene 2

#### Active Learning

So far: Duncan, the king's guards, Banquo, and now Lady Macduff and her children.

#### Debate Prompt

Think about the contrasts between this scene and the bloody and warlike atmosphere of the previous scenes.

### Act 4, Scene 3

#### Debate Prompt

Student's own answers

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**Act 5, Scene 1***Active Learning*

Student's own answers

*Debate Prompts*

1. Students might argue that Lady Macbeth was the more driven and persuasive play, whereas Macbeth was unsure about murder. Maybe he becomes quieter but Macbeth has no qualms about further murders.
2. Student's own answers

**Act 5, Scene 2***Active Learning*

1. Students might mention some of the following:  
He is powerless: he can't 'buckle' the 'belt of rule'  
His cause is 'distempered' (disturbed)  
People say he is mad  
He is not a popular king: those who follow him do so out of duty, not love
2. That his title as king is too good for him – he cannot live up to it

*Debate Prompt*

The mentions of Birnam Wood may give a clue. Could discuss dramatic irony here

**Act 5, Scene 3***Active Learning*

Students might focus on 'that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, I must not look to have; but, in their stead, / Curses', and analyse the sense of finality

*Debate Prompt*

It seems that the prophecies are the only things that he has left – they alleviate his

**Act 5, Scene 4***Active Learning*

1. Could it be that 'doubt it nothing', 'It shall be done'
2. He is saying that Macbeth's armies are as heartless as him, and that they seem forced to.

*Debate Prompt*

Students may know what happens next! If not, think of the mentions of 'The wood set down before Dunsinane.'

**Act 5, Scene 5***Debate Prompts*

1. Macbeth reacts to the news by reflecting on the shortness and fragility of life. He could show that he thinks now his wife is dead, life is not worth living; or his wife doesn't care much about her death as she would have died sometime anyway.
2. Perhaps he is honouring her as it was she who started his quest to be king; perhaps he won't let even this stop him in his quest.
3. Students' own responses

**Act 5, Scene 6***Active Learning*

Macduff was already determined to kill Macbeth when he found out that he'd killed his wife and children have been murdered by him, he is even more so – he is now also

*Debate Prompt*

At this stage, it seems like a desperate attempt to convince himself he may be safe

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## Act 5, Scene 8

### Active Learning

Macduff was born by caesarean section. This means that rather than his mother would have taken him from his mother's womb.

### Debate Prompt

1. Students might argue: Macduff may feel he wants to personally avenge his father's death, but it is more honourable to fight one to one with Macbeth.
2. Students' own answers

### Themes

#### Debate Prompt

Students' own answers

### Active Learning 1

Students' own answers

### Debate Prompt 2

Both try to persuade their husbands to act in accordance with traditional roles – husband to be more of a 'man', and when Lady Macduff resents her husband leaving her (not'). However, Lady Macbeth is more subversive in her relationship with her husband, having considerable power over him, where traditionally she would have been expected to be obedient about here.

### Active Learning 2

Students' own responses

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